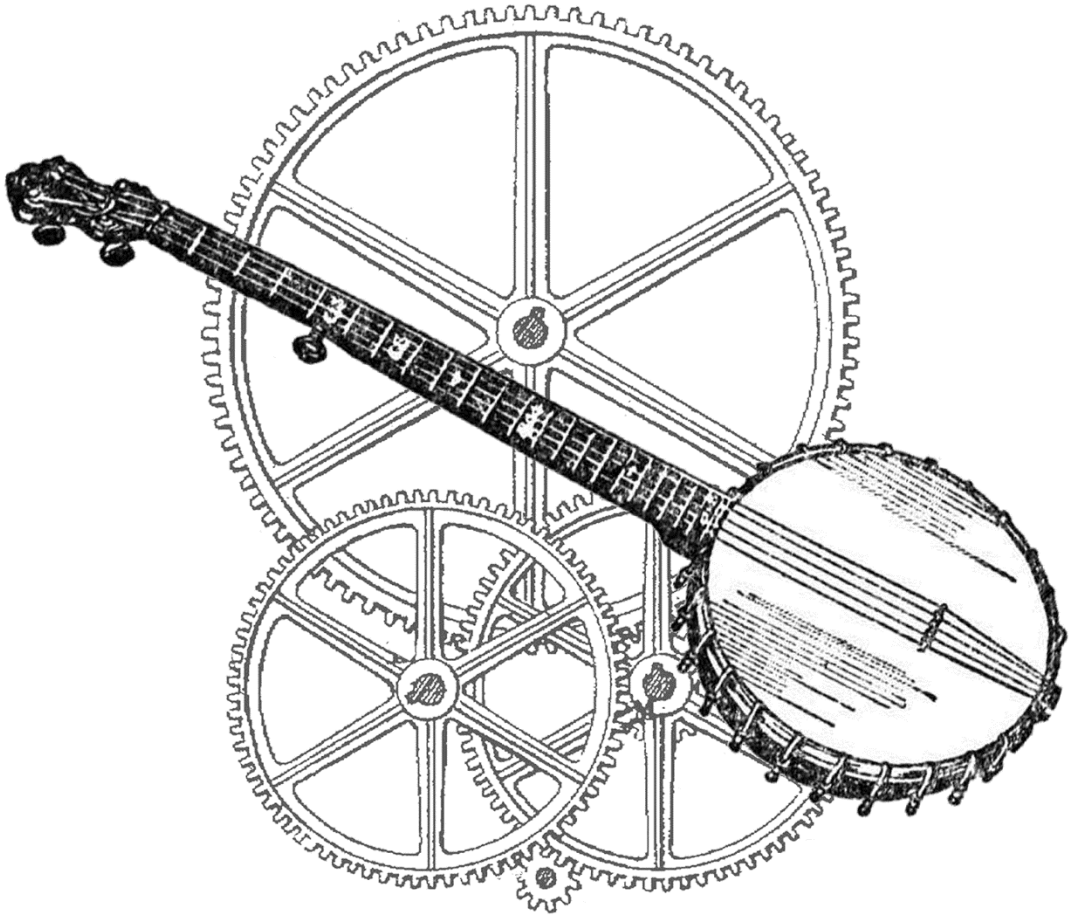
By the author of The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo

Patrick Costello

On Frailing Banjo Book One

The Mechanics of Frailing Banjo



The first in a series of web-enhanced guidebooks for making music with the five-string banjo.

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On Frailing Banjo

Book One

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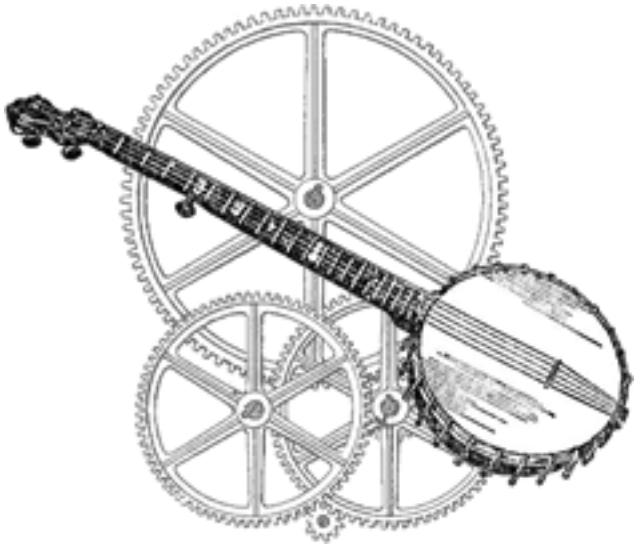

For Amy.

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really good music books
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Additional Online Content

This is a web-enhanced book.

The written word is a powerful teaching tool, but presenting the art of frailing banjo requires a bit more than words. To help you understand the skills and concepts in these pages we have produced additional web-based content. Rather than be confined to the space allotted on a CD or DVD, hosting this supplemental content on the Internet gives me the space to sit down and go through this book with you. Page by page. Song by song. You will not be struggling on your own. I will be right there with you. You can even send me sound and video files so that I can give you feedback on your progress.

And with practice you *will* progress.

Point your favorite web browser to frailingbanjo.com to gain access to the supplemental audio and video content.

Each volume of the Frailing Banjo series of books has its own password to access supplemental material.

The password for Volume One is:

X34eZ567#aQ

Author’s Note

No book is created in a vacuum. From the time I first picked up a banjo up to the present day my father, known as Dear Old Dad to our students around the world, has been by my side. Heck, he even did the editing for the book you now hold in your hands.

Without my father’s guidance and example I would not be the musician, teacher or man I am today.

This book is as much his as it is mine.

I love you Pop.

-Patrick

Dear Old Dad and Patrick getting ready to play on stage for the very first time.

Introduction

On a late autumn afternoon many years ago I played my banjo at a nursery school. Most of the kids were dancing and running around as I played. Banjo music has that effect on children.

One little boy was not dancing. He came close and stared at my hands as I played a tune. He watched my right hand striking the strings for a bit and then shouted, “Hey! This is easy! He just punches the banjo until music falls out!”

Out of the mouths of babes!

That could very well be the perfect definition of frailing.

> **Frailing**:
> *verb* *frail-ing*\
> Punching a banjo until music falls out.

That sharp-eyed kid was right. To play frailing banjo you hold your right hand in a sort of fist shape and strike down on the strings with your middle fingernail. The thumb also plucks down on strings. It may resemble punching the strings, but there is much more happening than mere fisticuffs.

Frailing banjo is a powerful approach to making music. That simple striking motion can draw melody, rhythm, harmony and percussion simultaneously from a five-string banjo.

Current methods for teaching frailing banjo have become fixated on melody. Songs are learned much like a child studying for a test. This is a disastrous way to approach making music because the art of the technique is surrendered in favor of simple memorization and repetition.

This series of books presents frailing from a musician’s perspective. In book one we explore the mechanics of frailing banjo. In book two we learn to work with music intuitively. In book three we will begin to understand the logic of the fretboard and from there I have many more wonderful things to share with you! We will learn to play and sing folk songs, country blues, dynamic bluegrass leads and instrumental breaks – alone or with other musicians.

Each book in the series will be enhanced with multimedia at frailingbanjo.com. You will not be exploring and learning on your own. My father and I will be with you every step of the journey.

Frailing banjo is an amazing approach to making music. This series of books will not just teach you how to play the banjo. They will also help you become a great musician who just happens to play the banjo.

It is my honor and privilege to share my art with you.

Patrick Costello
Spring, 2015

Getting Yourself Ready

". . . there is nothing outside of yourself that can ever enable you to get better, stronger, richer, quicker, or smarter. Everything is within. Everything exists. Seek nothing outside of yourself."
— Musashi Miyamoto, The Book of Five Rings

In this chapter we will explore:

- ***Parts of the Banjo***
- ***Your First Banjo***
- ***Essential Tools***
- ***Banjo Setup***
- ***Preparing Yourself***

Beginnings

Beginnings are wonderful things. That first step at the very start of a long journey always fills up my heart with joy and anticipation.

When I first took up the banjo I thought I was embarking on a journey. That is the accepted analogy for the learning process nowadays, and in some ways it fits – but the analogy of a journey implies an ending. In other words, that you will reach some point where there is nothing more to be learned. Happily, that is not the case. You never stop learning. Some of the greatest banjo players I have ever met were fully aware of how little they truly knew.

As you get ready to start making music with the five-string banjo I hope that you embrace this idea that you will never stop learning. I hope you realize that each and every musician you meet has something valuable to impart – even if it is something simple like providing an example of what *not* to do. Most of all I hope you realize how lucky we are to share this time together. When you get frustrated with your progress at some point down the road, just be aware that you are not alone in this. Every banjo player before you (that is a *lot* of people!) has been through this same process and felt just as lost or hopeless at some point in their own development. They got through it and went on to make beautiful music. So will you.

I know it is very trendy today to be goal-oriented. To undertake a task with an eye to some kind of reward at the end. Maybe treasure in this world or a glorious afterlife in the next. The trouble with goals in music is that you can end up so focused on reaching your goals that you miss out on the beauty that surrounds you at each step in the learning process.

Instead of thinking about the next level or moving from basic to advanced banjo playing, savor each and every moment for what it is: a gift. Yesterday is gone and tomorrow is off in some distant future. Right now. Right here. This moment is what matters. As Takuan Sōhō once beautifully put it:

> *Not twice this day*
> *Inch time foot gem.*
> *This day will not come again.*
> *Each minute is worth a priceless gem*

As you set up your banjo. As you learn the left and right hand mechanics of playing the banjo. As you learn songs. As you share music with people in homes and classrooms and hospital rooms be sure to take in everything. Everything is important. Every moment, no matter how trivial it may seem right now, will come but once in your lifetime. I am not suggesting that you get so hung up on the present moment that you never move forward. What I am saying is do not rush to progress. Enjoy each and every step of the process as you grow and develop your skills.

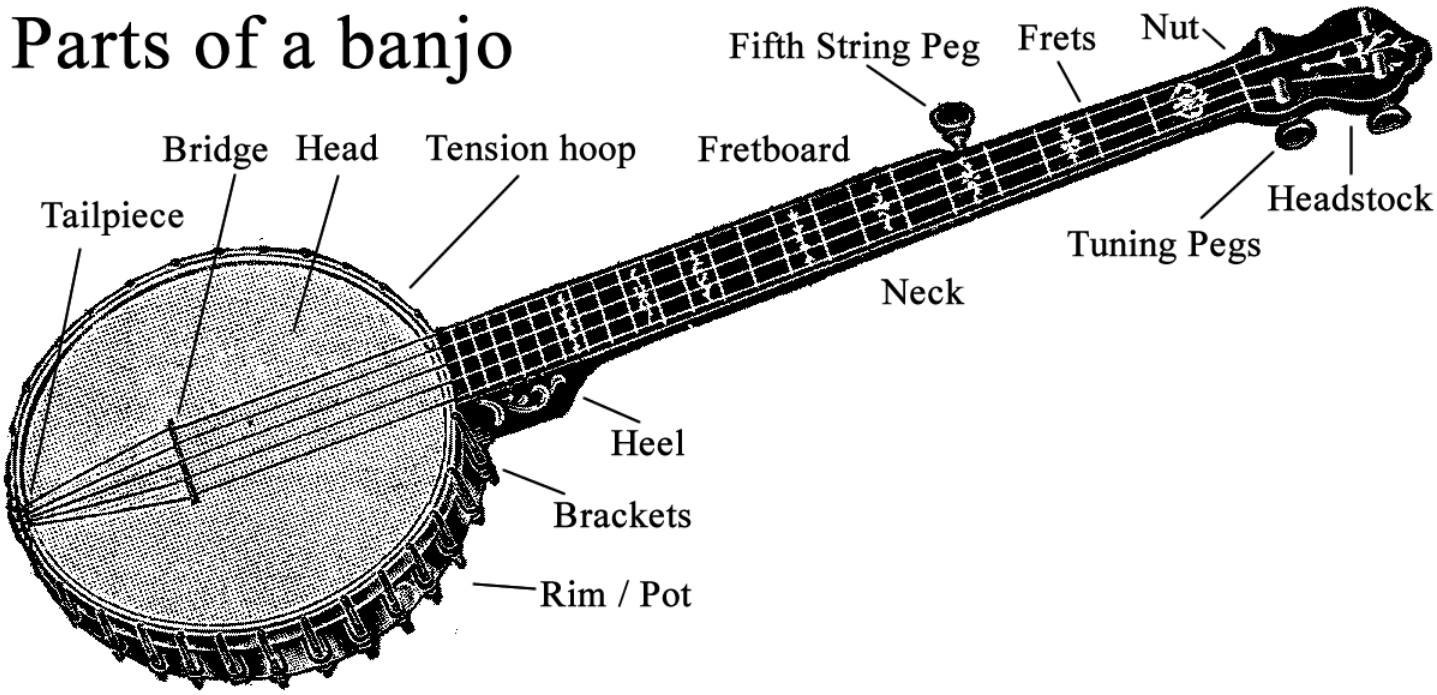
As I said in *A Book of Five Strings*, "A master banjo player isn't the person who can pick the most notes. It's the person who can touch the most hearts."

Now, get your banjo and let us take that first step together. Many adventures await!

Parts of a Banjo

I am going to take a leap of faith and assume that you have a five-string banjo. Not a four string banjo (called a tenor or plectrum banjo). Not a six-string banjo. A five-string banjo. A banjo with four long strings and one short string with a tuning peg situated near the fifth fret of the fretboard.

When people refer to the strings of a banjo they are almost always numbered one through five with the fifth string being the short string ending at a peg located at the fifth fret.



Your banjo may or may not have a resonator (a big dish attached to the back of the banjo) and it may or may not have a tone ring (a metal or wooden hoop under the head that makes the banjo ring). You may have what's referred to as a mountain banjo or you may be playing a copy of an early minstrel era banjo. As long as it has five strings you are good to go.

To put it simply, a banjo is just a hoop on a stick. A musical dictionary I had years ago disdainfully described the banjo as "A rude cross between a guitar and a tambourine".

The hoop part of the banjo – which most players refer to as the pot – is made of a wooden ring known as the rim. The rim on your banjo may or may not have a tone ring on top of it. The head of the banjo is stretched over the tone ring and rim with a tension hoop that is held down with bracket hooks.

The banjo neck attaches to the pot assembly with either a dowel stick or coordinator rods.

The banjo is strung by attaching the strings to the tailpiece, over the bridge, over the nut and then attached to the tuning pegs.

When you strike a banjo string the instrument produces sound when the string vibrations travel through the bridge to the head. The head (sometimes with the help of a tone ring) amplifies and projects those vibrations to the audience. Interestingly, the location of the strike can have an impact on the tone of the banjo. Strike close to the bridge for a sharp tone and close to the neck for a slightly softer tone. In the past few years it has become fashionable to scoop out the fretboard where the neck meets the pot. Your banjo may or may not have a scooped fretboard. It makes no difference.

There are several materials used to make banjo heads and all of them give different results. Calfskin heads were the standard back in the old days, but nowadays Mylar is the most common. I like a top-frosted Mylar head on my banjos.

There are many different tone ring designs, but they all do pretty much the same job. Some have cool names like White Laydie or tubaphone, and some are simply a brass rod rolled into a hoop. No design is better than the other. In fact, a banjo can still sound good without a tone ring. The main ingredient in banjo tone is your playing technique. No matter what type or style of banjo I play, the results still sound like Patrick Costello. In other words, don't worry too much about what you play and focus instead on playing.

Your First Banjo

My very first banjo was an old Harmony phenolic resonator banjo. Dear Old Dad and I started out taking bluegrass – also known as *Scruggs style* - banjo lessons but we both wanted to explore frailing banjo. When we finally ran across somebody who was willing to share banjo skills with us my dad put aside the Harmony, found an old Vega tenor (4 string) banjo and added a new five-string neck built by legendary banjo craftsman Lowell Jacobs. That is the banjo Dear Old Dad plays to this day.

Dear Old Dad also plays tenor – 4-string – banjo. His favorite tenor banjo was found at a flea market for $25.00. It is an old Slingerland 17-fret tenor. Nothing fancy, but he loves it.

Me? Well, to be honest, I am pretty hard on my instruments. I have worn out a lot of banjos over the years with all of my crazy adventures. I also have a habit of giving banjos away to people who need them. The two banjos I own at this writing are both custom instruments built to my specifications.

Dear Old Dad and I kind of represent both ends of the spectrum. Dad found a banjo he liked and stuck with it while I wear out banjos one after the other.

When it comes to recommending a banjo to students our advice is pretty simple: start with whatever you can find and later on, once you are making music, buy the best banjo you can afford.

Some people scramble around looking for a magic banjo that will make them a great player without the fuss and bother of practicing. That is a fool's errand because there is no magic banjo. The most expensive banjo in the world will sound just like the cheapest flea-market special if you have not put in the time and effort to get good. Some of the best folk, blues and country music ever recorded was performed by musicians playing inexpensive instruments.

Without a skilled musician even the most expensive and elaborately decorated creation of the luthier's art is little more than wood and wire. You make the music with your hands, heart and mind. The banjo is just a tool.

Start with something cheap and simple. Once you can make that sound good you will be ready for a fancy banjo and, most importantly, you will know from experience what you need to look for in terms of construction and design.

Tools of the Trade

Before we can start learning how to play the five-string banjo we have to make sure that we have assembled the proper tools – and make sure those tools are ready to use.

Essential Tools:

- A strap for your banjo
- A chromatic tuner
- An armless chair or stool
- Screwdrivers
- A small adjustable wrench

A **strap** is essential when you are learning to play. You can buy a strap made specifically for banjos or you can use a guitar strap. If you choose to use a guitar strap you will need to remove two bracket hooks on your banjo, thread them through the tabs on your guitar strap and replace them on the banjo. Attach your strap on the second bracket under the heel by the first string and the second bracket after the tailpiece.

A **chromatic tuner** is another essential tool. Tuning musical instruments is a skill that develops over time. Down the road you will be able to get your banjo in tune just by listening to it, but until you have developed your ear you need a tuner. When I started thirty years ago chromatic tuners were expensive high-tech devices. Nowadays they can be picked up cheaply almost anywhere. Heck, you can even download a tuner app for your cell phone!

I know it's comfortable to practice sprawled out on the couch or swinging in a hammock, but if you want your practice time to be effective it is better to have a **straight-backed chair** with no arms to get in the way.

Screwdrivers and an **adjustable wrench** will come in handy when you are setting up your banjo.

Recommended but not essential:

- A music stand
- An Instrument stand
- A notebook
- Two wooden spring-loaded clothespins

A **music stand** will hold books, like this particular volume, open and in front of you while leaving your hands free to play the banjo.

An **instrument stand** will keep your banjo in sight and readily accessible.

A musician's **notebook** will come in handy for jotting down tablature and song lyrics. Studies have shown that physically writing things down helps our memory.

Clothespins make a fantastic banjo mute. Just clip a clothespin to either side of the bridge and you get a substantial decrease in volume.

Banjo Setup

Banjos are basically bolt-together instruments. Unlike an acoustic guitar where everything is glued into place, banjos are held together with bolts, nuts and screws. This makes it easy to set up your banjo to your own preferences.

Stringing the Banjo

I like to use light gauge strings on my banjo. They play easier and don't tear up my fingertips or fingernails.

Most banjos have four tuning pegs in the headstock with the fifth string peg situated on the side of the neck near the fifth fret.

When you string your banjo, start by hooking the loop end of the string to the tailpiece. Then, keeping the loop end hooked, run the string through the hole in the tuning peg. Then bring the end of the string back around and feed it through the same hole and pull it tight. This will lock the string on the tuning peg, and keep it from slipping out of tune when you bend a string.

Turn the peg to tighten the string and then cut the excess string. If you don't have wire cutters handy you can run a nickel quickly along the excess string to form it into a tight spiral.

To keep an even tension on the nut, make sure the first and second strings wrap clockwise around the pegs. The third, fourth and fifth strings should wrap counterclockwise.

Head Tension

The main component of a banjo is the head. There is no standard for head size or head tensioning systems. Most modern banjos come with eleven inch heads, but this can vary from smaller than six inches to larger than thirteen inches in diameter.

Banjo heads come in a wide variety of thickness and can be made of Mylar, calfskin and a bunch of other stuff. It's up to you to decide what is right for your banjo - but please don't start changing things until you have been playing for a while.

My rule of thumb regarding banjo head tension is that if you run your hand under the banjo head and can feel the feet of the bridge sinking into the head you might want to tighten it a little bit.

Your banjo head has to have an even tension all the way around. An easy way to make sure that you achieve this is to move back and forth across the head. For example, tighten the bracket closest to the first string and then the bracket closest to the fifth string side of the tailpiece. Just give a quarter of a turn each time. Take it slow and make sure that your head is even all the way around. Don't get carried away. The only thing that sounds worse than a head that is too loose is one that is too tight.

The Action

In banjo player jargon, the action refers to the height of the strings in relation to the fretboard.

If the action is too high it will be hard to fret the instrument and if the action is too low the strings will buzz.

The action of your banjo can be affected by several things: The angle of the neck, the height of the nut, the height of the bridge and the tension of the banjo head.

Start out by checking the tension of the head. If the head is too loose the bridge will sink down and make the strings buzz.

If the head is tight but the strings still buzz the next step would be to try a taller bridge.

If you still get a buzz after trying a taller bridge the next step would be to check the nut. Sometimes the grooves in a banjo nut are cut too deeply. You can fix this by loosening the string and sliding a small piece of paper into the nut slot.

If all else fails, it could be the angle of the neck. Some banjos are built with one or two coordinator rods that serve the dual role of attaching the neck to the pot and controlling the angle of the neck. If the neck is angled too far forward the strings will be too high from the fretboard. Too far backwards will lower the action and cause a buzz. If you do have to adjust the coordinator rods of a banjo, work slowly and patiently.

Not all banjos have coordinator rods. You may have an old-fashioned instrument that uses a dowel stick to connect the neck to the pot. If you need the action adjusted on a dowel-stick banjo my advice would be to call a repair shop. It takes a bit of skill to adjust a dowel stick.

Sometimes a banjo neck can warp or twist with age. A luthier can sometimes repair this by adjusting the truss rod. Older banjos that do not have a truss rod can also be adjusted but this is a job better done by an experienced repair shop.

Placing the Bridge

Banjo bridges are held in place by string tension. Do not glue the bridge in place!

The bridge needs to be in the correct position for the notes to fret properly.

To position the bridge take an electronic tuner and compare the sound of the first string played both open and fretted at the twelfth fret. Your tuner should give you a D note for both the fretted & open strings. If your first string fretted at the twelfth fret reads a little sharp or flat just move the bridge backward or forward until it's in tune.

Once you get the bridge in the proper position mark around the feet with a pencil so that you can put it back in the correct place easily.

Adjustable Tailpieces

Your banjo may or may not have an adjustable tailpiece. Some old-school tailpieces like the no-knot have nothing but pins to hold the loop end of banjo strings. Other designs have a screw to adjust the angle and amount of down-pressure on the strings behind the bridge. The trick to using an adjustable tailpiece is to push the tailpiece down towards the head with one hand to take the pressure off the adjusting screw on the back of the tailpiece. Use your free hand to tighten or loosen the adjusting screw.

Preparing Yourself

Once your banjo is set up and ready to play the last thing you need to prepare is yourself.

I am always amazed when people come to me for a banjo lesson and start out by telling all of the reasons they are never going to be able to make music. They beat themselves up into feeling like a failure before they ever touch a string!

I am nearly deaf. I hear through surgically implanted bone anchored hearing aids. People always ask me how I became a musician in spite of my hearing. The truth is, I never really thought about it. I wanted to make music so I found a way.

I want you to believe me when I say that you can do this.

Your hands are not too big. Your hands are not too small. You are smart enough to make music. You are beautiful enough to have something to share with the world. You are not lacking in anything.

I have never met you, but I wrote this book for you. I believe in you.

Chu'i the draftsman
could draw more perfect circles
freehand than with a compass.

His fingers brought forth
spontaneous forms from nowhere.
His mind was meanwhile free and
without concern with what he was doing.

No application was needed
his mind was perfectly simple
and knew no obstacle.

So, when the shoe fits,
the foot is forgotten.
When the belt fits,
the belly is forgotten.
And when the heart is right,
for and against are forgotten.

No drives, no compulsions,
no needs, no attractions;
when your affairs are under control
you are a free man.

Easy is right.
Begin right and you are easy -
continue easy and you are right.
The right way to go easy
is to forget
the right way
and forget that
the going is easy.

~Chuang Tzu

Open G Tuning

A long time ago, banjos were mostly homemade instruments – and a lot of those homemade instruments did not have fretboards. Without frets it was difficult to form chords, so a large number of banjo tunings were developed to facilitate playing in different keys. In some cases new tunings were created for a performance or a single song.

In the late 19th century factory-made fretted instruments became widely available. The old tunings were still around, but with the introduction of frets banjo players were able to apply chord shapes to play in different keys without retuning.

In the early 20th century open G tuning was huge on the guitar. You will often see open G in country blues and Hawaiian guitar styles. Some guitar players called open G Spanish tuning for its association with the popular waltz "The Spanish Fandango".

It is called open G tuning simply because the strings are tuned to the notes of a G chord.

I do not know exactly when open G tuning became the more or less standard tuning for the five-string banjo. When I was starting out every banjo player I met knew a handful of tunings - but open G was always treated as a sort of universally accepted starting point. While we will explore other tunings in later volumes of this series, for right now I want you to tune your banjo to open G.

In open G tuning:

- The 5th string is tuned to **G**.
- The fourth string is tuned to **D**.
- The third string is tuned to **G**.
- The second string is tuned to **B**.
- The first string is tuned to **D**.

Be sure to have the string ringing when you crank on your tuning pegs. This helps you avoid tightening the string past its breaking point.

To tune your banjo without a tuner just follow these steps:

1. Assume that your first string is at least close to being in tune.
2. Play your second string at the third fret.
   Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the first string played open.
3. Play your third string at the fourth fret.
   Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the second string played open.
4. Play your fourth string at the fifth fret.
   Tune it up or down so that it matches the sound of the third string played open.
5. The fifth string played open should sound the same as the first string played at the fifth fret.

This also works as a quick and easy way to check your tuning between songs. Just don't do it into the microphone if you are on stage.

Now that we are in tune, let's begin exploring the mechanics of frailing banjo!

The Mechanics of Frailing Banjo

"The true science of martial arts means practicing them in such a way that they will be useful at any time, and to teach them in such a way that they will be useful in all things."
~ Miyamoto Musashi, A Book of Five Rings

In this chapter we will explore:

- ***How to Hold the Banjo***
- ***The Strike***
- ***The Strum***
- ***The Thumb***
- ***Drop-Thumb & Double Thumb***
- ***Old Joe Clark***
- ***Developing A Practice Routine***

The Elements of Frailing banjo

There are three elements to the craft of frailing banjo.

- The picking hand
- The fretting hand
- The player

The picking hand creates melody, rhythm and percussion. The picking hand also controls the volume and tempo of a song.

The fretting hand applies pressure to individual strings on the fretboard to create notes, applies pressure to groups of strings to create chords and creates dynamic effects with what I like to call salt & pepper techniques.

The person playing the banjo has to train and coordinate the picking and fretting hands, but it does not end there. The musician also adds in some melody with his or her voice. This is whole body music.

One interesting aspect of frailing banjo is that the technique of down-picking made a pretty huge impact on other American folk instruments. Many legendary country and blues guitar players started out on the banjo. As you master the techniques of frailing banjo you will begin to gain perspective on how the core concepts of this technique could be applied to the guitar, autoharp and countless other instruments.

In this chapter we will begin training the picking hand.

Unlike other stringed instrument techniques where there are a lot of individual rolls or patterns to memorize, in frailing banjo the picking hand only has three simple tasks.

The picking hand:

- Strikes down on an individual string for a single note.
- Strikes down across several strings for a chord brush.
- Plucks down for a single note with the thumb.

That's it. Strike, strum and thumb. That's all there is to it.

It is a beautifully simple approach to making music, but don't let that fool you into thinking that it cannot sound deeply complex to an audience. With its ability to blend melody, rhythm, harmony and percussion, frailing banjo is a powerful technique.

There is also one little catch to the simplicity of frailing banjo: your fingers don't move.

With the exception of your thumb rotating after plucking a string, there is no finger motion involved in striking and strumming the strings. Your hand is loosely held in a still position while the striking and strumming motion is accomplished by moving your arm. Your wrist does no move. Your fingers do not flick. Your arm drives your hand down to strike a string with your middle fingernail and your arm drives your hand down and across the strings to strum a chord with your middle finger. The motion is economical and easy on the body. If you practice faithfully you will discover that you can play all day without getting fatigued. It is a beautiful, graceful, dynamic and powerful technique that can be

learned quickly and easily. After a lifetime of practice and study I am still discovering new things that can be accomplished with the technique of frailing banjo.

Are you as excited as I am? Great! Let's get started.

The Strike

Dear Old Dad illustrates proper banjo posture.

Get your banjo into open G tuning as described in the last chapter and sit down in a firm straight-backed chair with no arms.

Sit up straight.

Use your banjo strap to support the instrument. This is essential. I cannot stress strongly enough how important it is to practice with both good posture and a banjo strap supporting the instrument.

Hold the banjo in your lap with the pot flat against your belly. Not off to the side, not on your knee.

Do not angle the banjo in your lap so you can see the strings. Keep the pot flat against your belly.

Do not hunch over the banjo so you can better see the strings. Sit up straight. Don't bother to look at the strings at all. Looking won't help you because there is nothing to see. Because we strike the strings with our middle fingernail you will never get a clear view of your technique, so don't waste time looking.

So, like I said. Sit up straight, use your strap to support the banjo and keep the banjo pot flat against your belly.

Bring the banjo neck up so that the fifth peg is near your left ear. If you were facing a clock you would want the neck somewhere around 10 or 11 o'clock.

For now your left hand isn't going to have much to do. Use it to cradle the banjo neck if you want. Just remember that you really want to let your strap support the neck. Fretting hand techniques come a bit later.

Hold your right arm out and make a fist. Now stick out your index finger and thumb just like when you were a kid playing cops and robbers. You want that sort of "gun" shape. Do not clench your remaining three fingers to your palm but rather try to relax and keep everything loose. Tension just slows things down.

The middle finger should be a hair extended.

Look at your hand. You've got your thumb up, your index finger a bit extended, your middle finger loosely curled and the last two fingers lightly touching your palm.

Now that you've got your hand into a rough frailing shape drop that whole arrangement of fingers down onto the banjo head.

Put your thumb onto the banjo head so that you are just a little bit shy of touching the rim with the tip of your thumb. The pad of your thumb should be against the fifth string.

Rest your middle fingernail on the first string.

Index finger out of the way, middle finger ready to strike and thumb on the fifth string.

Striking down on the string.

Keeping your thumb on the fifth string, keeping your hand in the position we just described, roll your forearm to raise your middle fingernail off of the first string.

Now use your forearm to drive your hand down so that your middle fingernail strikes the first string.

Your fingernail should hit flat against the string until the string pops off of the nail and then your hand immediately comes back up.

This is not a big motion. Your thumb should stay on the fifth string for now acting as a sort of guide.

Play the strike on the first string a few times. Do it in counts of four.

Strike: Strike Strike Strike Strike | Strike Strike Strike Strike

Count: 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4

It may be difficult at first to get a loud clear tone from the strike. Do not get discouraged. Everybody has a hard time with this at first. Just practice calmly and methodically. Think about how your middle fingernail makes contact with, and then snaps off, the string.

It may be tempting to try flicking your finger, snapping your wrist or even switching to the index finger for the strike. Do not do this. Stick to striking with the middle fingernail. Continue to use your arm to drive the strike rather than flicking the fingers or wrist. While alternative methods may give you quicker short-term results, they will let you down in the long run. If you wish to gain proficiency down the road and create exciting expressive music you have to put the effort in now. Stay true to the technique. Use good form and good posture.

*Position to strike the **first** string.*

*Position to strike **fourth** string.*

Once you get comfortable with the idea of just dropping your hand down to strike the first string try striking down with the middle fingernail on your second, third and fourth strings.

To hit those inside strings just look at your hand again. Your thumb is resting on the fifth string. If you close the space between the index finger and thumb you should see that you are able to position your hand so that it is over the string you want to hit.

Let's play a few exercises striking the four long string of the banjo. Rather than jumping into tablature right now we can focus purely on technique using a simple notation system.

In an earlier example we just had strike and count written out.

Strike: Strike Strike Strike Strike | Strike Strike Strike Strike

Count: 1 2 3 4 | 1 2 3 4

Let's simply that. Keep on counting in groups of four, but now the numbers will represent strings.

1 1 1 2 | 1 2 3 4 | 1 1 2 2

The first group of notes – let's call that a measure – is telling you to strike the first string three times followed by a strike on the second string. In the second measure we strike the first, second third and fourth string. All while counting out loud. What does the third measure tell you to do?

Try jotting down a few single string exercises of your own. Be sure to group things into four strikes. Count slowly and evenly.

The Strum

Once you are comfortable with that we can add in the next element of frailing: the strum.

This is wonderfully easy.

Start out by striking any string. As you recover from the strike, close the webbing between your thumb and index finger so that your middle fingernail is over the fourth string. Now drive your middle fingernail down and across three or four strings. Through all of this, keep your thumb resting on the fifth string.

Do not flick your fingers. Like the strike, the strum must come from the arm. Because of this you will not be strumming straight across the strings. It's more of an arc than a straight line. If you look in a mirror as you practice you will notice that your strike on the first string will be closer to the bridge and your strike on the fourth string will be closer to the neck. The same applies to your strum. The strum will begin closer to the neck and end closer to the bridge. This is not a big motion, so don't get overdramatic with it. Just be aware that, because the motion of the strike and strum comes from the arm, the motion has a slight horizontal arc shape.

As you complete the strum recover just like you did after the strike. Your hand should again be in position to strike. Keep a steady count.

Strike. Strum. Strike. Strum. One. Two. Three. Four.

Listen to your banjo as you strike and strum. Are the strings ringing clearly?

We could jot this out in the simple notation with S representing the strum. Count out loud as you strike and strum in repeating groups of four. Just, "One two three four" over and over again.

1 S 2 S | 3 S 4 S | 1 S 2 S

Practice this for a while until you can clearly strike any string and follow it up with a clean strum. I cannot stress how essential it is to take this slowly. Use good form and posture while you practice.

As you get more comfortable with the strike and strum start experimenting with dynamics. Try to strike lightly for a softer tone and with more gusto to increase the volume.

You can also change the tone of your banjo by changing where you strike and strum. Striking close to the bridge will give you a crisper and sharper tone. Striking close to the neck yields a softer sound from the strings. This is due to string tension. There is more tension on the strings at the bridge so your attack will produce different results than close to the neck where there is less tension on the string.

Understanding these dynamics now will widen your tonal palette as you gain experience.

Now let's take another look at the last exercise:

We are striking and strumming while counting from one to four. Well, by doing this we are playing a 4/4 time rhythm. The terminology is not that important right now. What is important is the idea that each number in our count is called a beat and each group of four beats creates a measure of music. So in that exercise we are playing three measures with four beats each.

Run through it again:

1 S 2 S | 3 S 4 S | 1 S 2 S

Play this exercise slowly. As you begin count, "One" for the initial strike on the first string. Count, "Two" as you strum. Count, "Three" as you strike the second string and count, "Four" as you strum. The count starts all over again in the second measure. Each strike and each strum counts as a single beat.

Being able to keep a steady rhythm while you count beats is an essential skill. If you cannot maintain a steady rhythm it will be almost impossible to play with other musicians. Practice a steady strike-strum pattern for a little while before you start adding in your thumb.

The Thumb

As I have said over and over, in frailing banjo we strike and strum down on the strings. There are no upstrokes. Each strike and each strum counts as a single beat.

If we were playing the guitar, ukulele, mandolin or other folk instruments we could cut a beat in half by following a downward stroke with an upward stroke.

On the five-string banjo we replace the upstroke with the fifth string.

You will hear some banjo players call the fifth string a drone string. This is not correct. A true drone rings constantly like the strings on a mountain dulcimer or the drone pipes on a bagpipe. No, the fifth string is not a drone.

The fifth string is a rhythmic device with a single job. The fifth string cuts beats in half.

On the guitar we get the classic, "Boom chuck-a" rhythm used in countless songs by playing down down-up. A single beat with a down-stroke followed by two half-beats with a down and up-stroke.

In frailing banjo we get the same effect by playing a downward strike, a downward strum and then we cut the beat of the strum in half by thumbing the fifth string.

Strike – Strum-thumb.

Strike any string. As you recover from the strike, close the webbing between your thumb and index finger so that your middle fingernail is over the third or fourth string. Now drive your middle fingernail down and across the four strings. At the end of the strum your thumb will be putting some pressure on the fifth string. Let it pop off.

Strike – Strum-thumb.

Since we have cut the second beat in half we count, "One, two and". To fill out a four-count measure we play the strike strum-thumb pattern twice and count, "One, two and three, four and".

In our simple notation system we would write out three measures of the strike strum-thumb pattern as:

1 ST 2 ST | 3 ST 4 ST | 1 ST 2 ST

As we play the strike strum-thumb pattern, let your thumb take on a gentle rolling motion. You may slap or brush the head of the banjo as your thumb returns after plucking the fifth string. This is okay. In fact, that thumb sound will add a percussive effect to the overall sound.

Keep the pattern rolling slowly with each element clearly ringing. One, two and three, four and.

This single beat, two half-beat pattern is essential to the craft of frailing banjo. It may be difficult at first to keep a steady rhythm. It may seem counterintuitive to only strike and strum down on the strings. It may seem crazy to use the fifth string to cut beats in half. Why the middle fingernail? I had the same questions and doubts when I started.

I think it is natural for a student beginning in any craft, be it martial arts, blacksmithing, carpentry, weaving or anything else, to feel a little lost and confused when the skills are presented. I think it is natural for our brains to cook up shortcuts and it is natural to want to skip over the training and get right to the cool stuff.

Everybody goes through this. The people who continue training in spite of those doubts go on to master the craft. The people who give in to the doubts and waste time conjuring up shortcuts end up quitting out of frustration or telling people that they could not advance because they lacked talent.

I do not believe in talent. Nobody is born knowing how to play the banjo. I did not just pick up a banjo and start making great music. I worked hard for a long time. I struggled with doubts and thought about looking for shortcuts, but once I started hitting the strings I fell in love with the sound of the banjo. When my hearing began to fail I kept on learning and studying this craft because I love the banjo. This technique is capable of such beauty and expressiveness that I kept on practicing even when things seemed hopeless.

So don't look for shortcuts. Trust the craft. Trust me. Trust yourself. You can do this.

The ability to keep this steady, "One, two and three, four and" rhythm, the Strike strum-thumb pattern, is in a lot of ways the heart of frailing banjo. This is not the only pattern we use, as you will see once we add in double-thumb and drop thumb, but the strike strum-thumb gives us the ability to create the illusion of a melody line floating over a rhythm line. It gives us the ability to sing along with the banjo. It gives us the ability to step into any jam session, regardless of the genre of music being played, and join in.

Old Joe Clark

Now that you can play the strike, strum and thumb I guess it is time to try using it in a song.

The very first song I learned on the five-string banjo was "Old Joe Clark". It is very simple and a lot of fun to play.

Let's keep using our simple notation system, but add in something to tell you where to fret the strings. The large number will indicate what string to strike and the number in superscript – the little number – will indicate which fret to place your finger on. This is similar to the notation system Bill Cunningham used in his banjo workshops a long time ago. Bill learned frailing banjo from his grandfather in the 1930's and then went on to give workshops with legendary banjo player Stu Jamieson. I was lucky enough to play and work with both with Bill and Stu. They were truly cool old dudes.

Now, where were we? Take a look at the fretboard of your banjo. The neck starts with the headstock where the tuning pegs are. Strings are wound around the tuning pegs and then run over the nut and down the fretboard, over the head to the bridge. The fret closest to the nut is the first fret and they count down from there. Your fifth string peg is usually at or near the fifth fret. When you apply pressure to a string at a given fret the string comes in contact with the fret-wire. As you fret a string the note of the string goes up in pitch.

Let's take a look at two measures from the song "Old Joe Clark":

$$\mathbf{1^0\ 1^2\ 1^3\ 1^2\ |\ 1^0\ 2^1\ 2^0\ ST}$$

In the first group of four beats, the first measure, we strike the first string open on the first beat. On the second beat we strike the first string while fretting the first string at the second fret. Try figuring the rest out on your own. The count for these two measures should be, “One two three four. One two three four and.”

Now let’s try playing the verse of “Old Joe Clark”. Run through the verse and chorus a few times. Then try playing and singing.

$1^0\ 1^2\ 1^3\ 1^2$ | $1^0\ 2^1\ 2^0$ ST | $1^0\ 1^2\ 1^3\ 1^2$ | 1^0 ST 1^0 ST

$1^0\ 1^2\ 1^3\ 1^2$ | $1^0\ 2^1\ 2^0$ ST | 3^0 ST $3^2\ 4^3$ | 3^0 ST 3^0 ST

Here is the chorus to “Old Joe Clark”:

3^0 ST 3^0 ST | $1^0\ 2^1\ 2^0$ ST | 3^0 ST 3^0 ST | $4^3\ 3^2\ 3^2$ ST

3^0 ST 3^0 ST | $1^0\ 2^1\ 2^0$ ST | 3^0 ST $3^2\ 4^3$ | 3^0 ST 3^0 ST

Old Joe Clark’s a fine old man
I’ll tell you the reason why
He keeps corn liquor in his house
Good old rock and rye

Chorus:

Fare thee well Old Joe Clark
Fare thee well I say
Fare thee well Old Joe Clark
I’m bound to go away

Spend some time playing slowly through “Old Joe Clark”. As you do so, give yourself a pat on the back for playing a tune on the five-string banjo. Some people go their whole lives without getting this far with the instrument.

That said . . . don’t get a swelled head just yet. You are, after all, playing this song as a series of mechanical steps. Following instructions. There is more to making music than this. You can learn the mechanical steps to play dozens of songs and still be a long distance from making music.

I am not trying to discourage you. Far from it. I just want you to be aware that there is much to learn. As we travel through the pages of this book I will be sharing more skills, techniques and concepts with you so that you can begin to make the jump from playing songs mechanically to making music. You never stop learning. I have been playing the banjo for most of my life and I still learn something every time I pick up the banjo. The goal of this journey is not the end, but to embrace the journey itself!

A Quick Overview

At this point we know the three elements of the picking hand in frailing banjo.

- The strike
- The strum
- The thumb

We have used the strike and the strum to play single beats.

We have used the thumb on the fifth string to cut single beats in half.

We have emphasized the importance of practicing a single beat, two half beat pattern: Strike strum-thumb.

We began exploring the tune “Old Joe Clark”.

There are two more picking hand techniques to explore.

Double Thumb

As I said earlier, the fifth string is used to cut beats in half. For rhythm playing we thumb the fifth string to cut the strum beat in half. This is not the only time we use the thumb. We can also cut the beat of a single note strike in half by thumbing the fifth string after a strike. This is called double-thumbing because you are, in a sense, doubling the note by cutting it in half.

To practice double thumbing simply strike a string and follow up the strike by thumbing the fifth string. As you do this count in half beats, “One and”.

We could jot down a double thumb exercise in our simple notation:

1T 1T 1T 2T | 1T 2T 3T 4T | 1T 1T 2T 2T

As you play this exercise be sure to count your measures in half beats. “One and two and three and four and.”

We could also add double thumb into the strike-strum pattern.

1T ST 2T ST | 3T ST 4T ST | 1T ST 2T ST

As you play this exercise be sure to count your measures in half beats. “One and two and three and four and.”

Go back to “Old Joe Clark” and try double thumbing the single note strikes.

It changes the whole feel of the song, doesn’t it?

You do not need to double thumb every single note strike. Sometimes a song needs the clarity of a single note and sometimes a song needs the feeling of speed double-thumbing can provide. Think about your choices as you learn more songs. Don’t fall into thinking that every arrangement of a tune needs lots of one technique over another. Single notes, single beats, double-thumb and split beats all have their place. Make the choice that best expresses how you feel in the given moment.

Drop Thumb

Another technique you can use with your thumb is drop-thumbing.

Drop thumb is just what its name implies. You drop your thumb from the fifth string to hit one of the four main strings of the banjo.

It is an easy technique. Let’s try a simple drop-thumb pattern.

1. Strike the first string.
2. Bring your thumb down and pluck the second string.
3. Strike the first string again.
4. Thumb the fifth string.

As you do this the count is, “One and two and”. If we were to repeat the pattern to fill out the measure the count would be, “One and two and three and four and”.

Drop thumb is a useful technique, but it lacks the rhythmic drive of the strike strum-thumb pattern. I don’t recommend over-using drop thumb, but it can be an effective technique if it is thoughtfully applied.

Developing a Practice Routine

Practice is an essential part of learning to play a musical instrument. I know, stating the obvious here, but I cannot stress strongly enough how important it is to have a daily practice routine.

I think where folks run into trouble is that they do something a few times and tell themselves that they have practiced enough. For example, I know that a few people reading this book will jump right into "Old Joe Clark", play it a few times and tell themselves that they are ready for the next thing. The trouble is not just that they rush through; they also fall into the trap of thinking that there is some end point in the learning process. A goal. A level. A black belt.

The banjo does not work that way. There is no end to learning. There is no badge or ceremony you get when you attain a given level. There is no black belt for banjo playing.

Practice does not make perfect. Practice makes things familiar. Practice makes things comfortable.

The goal of practice in frailing banjo is to take the down-picking mechanics and become so familiar with them that they become second nature. Your goal should be to play the strike strum-thumb pattern with an unselfconscious and effortless grace.

We will discuss this idea in greater detail in upcoming volumes in this series. For right now, just spend some time with your banjo. Start out with the exercises we went through for the strike, the strum and the thumb. Then spend some time with the strike strum-thumb pattern. Then have some fun with "Old Joe Clark".

Pick up your banjo every day. Not because you have to practice, pick it up because you love to play the banjo. Run through some picking patterns and do not worry too much about progress. Just enjoy the sensation of your middle fingernail striking and brushing the strings. Listen to your tone and adjust your hand and arm accordingly. Most of all, enjoy the process.

Overview

In this chapter we discussed the mechanics of the picking hand in frailing banjo.

We learned the three tasks for the picking hand:

- Strikes down on an individual string for a single note.
- Strikes down across several strings for a chord brush.
- Plucks down for a single note with the thumb.

We learned how to **hold the banjo**.

We learned several **patterns**, the most important being the **strike strum-thumb**.

We learned a simple version of "**Old Joe Clark"**.

We discussed **drop-thumb** and **double thumb**.

We discussed the importance of a **daily practice routine**.

That is a lot of material to digest. Take some time to get comfortable with the techniques in this chapter before you move on.

The Rhythm of Frailing Banjo

Beauty of style and harmony and grace and good rhythm depend on simplicity — I mean the true simplicity of a rightly and nobly ordered mind and character, not that other simplicity which is only a euphemism for folly.
~Plato, The Republic

In this chapter we will explore:

- ***Reading Banjo Tab***
- ***Rhythm and Tempo***
- ***Time Signatures***
- ***Note Values***
- ***Rhythm in 4/4 Time***
- ***Rhythm in 3/4 Time***

Frailing banjo is a highly rhythmic approach to making music.

Some instruments, the violin for example, are very strong when it comes to melody. Other instruments, like the guitar, have the ability to jump from playing melody to playing rhythm.

In frailing banjo we blend melody and rhythm together.

A Musical Smith Island Cake

Smith Island lies off the shores of Crisfield Maryland, out in the Chesapeake Bay. It is a tiny place with nice folks. Well, on that island they make these amazing cakes. A Smith Island cake can have up to ten layers!

Oh, it's the best cake in the world.

Frailing banjo is a lot like a Smith Island cake. A strong frailing banjo player can play melody supported by rhythm with harmony from the chords and percussion from the fifth string. We can create rich and complex rhythms that get people tapping their feet and bobbing their heads – and we do all of this with very simple tools. The strike, the strum and the thumb.

Reading Banjo Tablature

To help us in our discussion I will be illustrating banjo techniques and songs using a notation system called tablature.

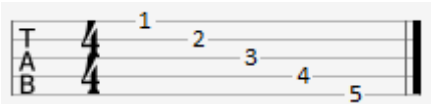
Banjo tablature, better known as banjo tab, is a notation system that that tells us what strings to strike, strum and fret.

Musical notation - sheet music - gives us the musical pitches of a song. It tells us what notes to play.

Banjo tab tells us how to mechanically play the song. Literally where to put your fingers on the instrument.

The five lines represent the five strings of your banjo.

The top line represents the first string, and the bottom line – the fifth line – represents the fifth string.



When any string has a zero you play that string open.

Numbers on a string tells you what fret to play.

A series of numbers running one on top of the other tells you to strum a chord.

You will also notice a symbol consisting of two stacked numbers at the beginning of each example. That is the time signature.

Time Signatures

Understanding time signatures will help you get a better grasp of rhythm.

Musicians count time in beats, and we group those beats into measures.

A time signature has two numbers, one on top of the other. The number on top tells us how many beats are in each measure. The number on the bottom tells us the **note value** of a single beat.

- **4/4 time** = four beats per measure with each beat having a quarter note value.
- **3/4 time** = three beats per measure with each beat having a quarter note value

We count the beat in a measure of 4/4 time as, "One two three four".

We count the beat in a measure of 3/4 time as, "One two three". Another interesting quirk of 3/4 time is that we usually put emphasis on the first beat to create the lilting effect of waltzes. So the count becomes, "**One** two three".

There are many other possible time signatures. In this book we are going to focus on the two most common time signatures used by frailing banjo players. 4/4 time and 3/4 time.

Rhythm and Tempo

Before we begin I should point out two terms that often get confused: rhythm and tempo.

As I said earlier, musicians count time in beats.

Rhythm is the count, or the pulse, of those beats in music.

Tempo is the speed of the beat.

These differences are important because rhythm and tempo are independent concepts. For example, you could play "Cripple Creek" at either a fast or slow tempo – but the rhythm would be the same.

- **Rhythm** = the beat.
- **Tempo** = the speed of the beat.

Note Values

The whole time signature deal makes a bit more sense if you understand note values.

- A **whole note** is held for the entire measure.
- A **half note** is held for one half of the measure.
- A **quarter note** is held for – you guessed it – one quarter of the measure.
- An **eighth note** is held for one eighth of the measure.

To play a whole note in 4/4 time simply strike a banjo string once and count to four. For half notes strike once and count "one two" strike again and count "three four". It's that simple.

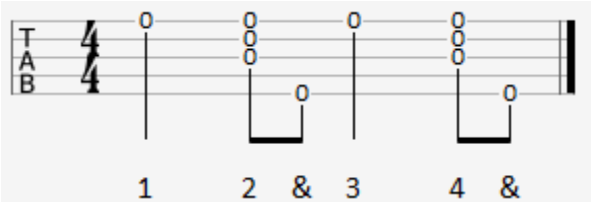
In frailing banjo we are primarily working with quarter notes and eighth notes, but it can be less confusing just to think of it in terms of beats.

- A strike or a strum = **one beat**
- Thumb = **cuts the beat in half**

So in 4/4 time we could play four strikes a measure, four strums a measure or a combination of the two with the thumb coming into play to create half beats. For example, the most common pattern that blends melody and rhythm for a single measure is: strike strum-thumb, strike strum-thumb.

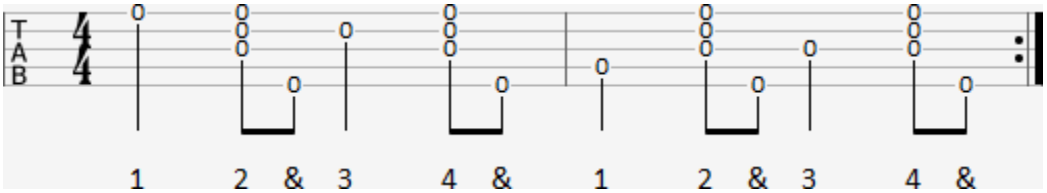
Rhythm in 4/4 Time

Let's take a look at the strike strum-thumb pattern we worked on in the last chapter. Just as we did earlier, we want to play four beats to fill the measure. Note that the chord strum is marked out with only the strings we brush. As you advance keep in mind that it is best to always make the full chord when possible.



As you can see, we strike the first string, strum a chord and thumb the fifth string, strike the first string, strum a chord and thumb the fifth string. This gives us four beats. Because we cut the strum in half with our thumb on the fifth string the count becomes 1 2 & 3 4 &.

Let's try that frailing pattern using different strings for the strike.



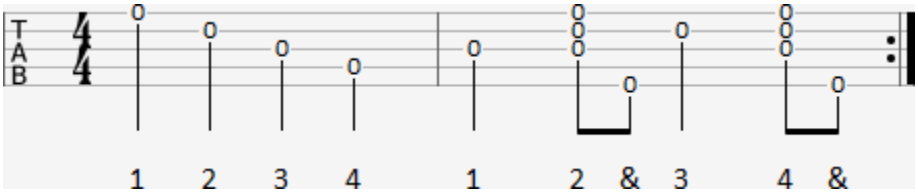
Take note of the double black line with two dots at the end of the second measure. That is a repeat symbol.

As you play through this example you might struggle to get a loud clear strike on the inside strings. If this is the case, slow down to a tempo where you can get clear notes and keep a steady rhythm.

Keep in mind that the strum-thumb is a beat cut in half. The strum and thumb together should ring for the same amount of time as the strike.

As simple as the strike strum-thumb pattern is, you can make amazing music with it. I do not know of another instrument that can blend melody and rhythm together the way we do in frailing banjo. The first time I ever heard somebody play the banjo in this fashion I was convinced that there was more than one banjo playing. I heard the melody of the old song, "Wildwood Flower" but I also heard rhythm. In a lot of ways that was the sound that brought me to the instrument.

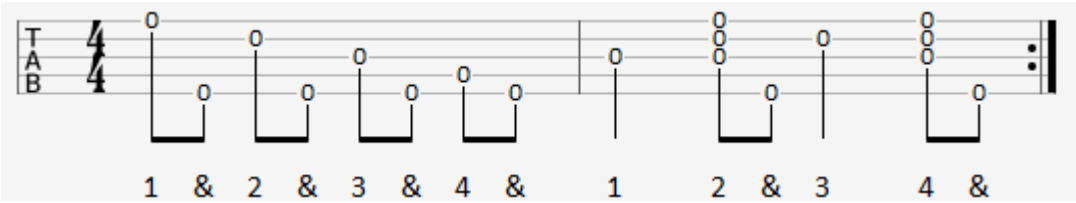
Now let's try a measure of four even strikes followed by a return to the strike strum-thumb pattern.



As you repeat through this a few times listen to the way returning to the strike strum-thumb pattern gives the exercise a feeling of drive and direction. If we were just playing measures of four strikes over and over it would start to feel repetitive, but the strike strum-thumb pattern creates the impression of a driving rhythm.

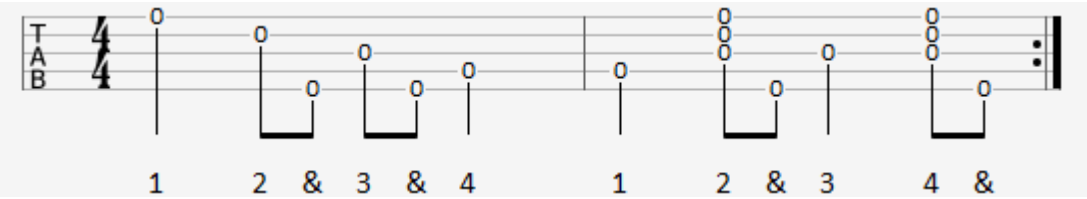
Double Thumb Rhythm

Let's try that last example with double thumb.



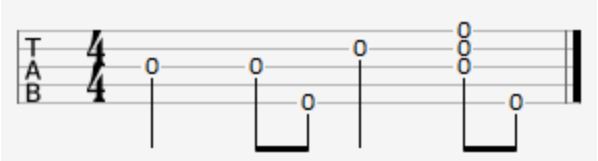
Double thumb is an interesting technique because it creates the illusion of speed. By cutting the beat in half the melody notes have an entirely different feeling. Try playing the last exercise both ways. Alternate between four even strikes and four double thumbs. Listen to the difference, but also *feel* the difference.

Double thumbing is a powerful rhythmic tool. Learn to use it judiciously so that your audience does not get worn out on it. This next example blends single strikes with double thumb.



Also notice that we strike the fourth string on the fourth beat in the first measure, and then again on the first beat in the second measure. It can be tempting to rush or slur two consecutive strikes on the same string, so be steady in your count and play the notes cleanly and clearly.

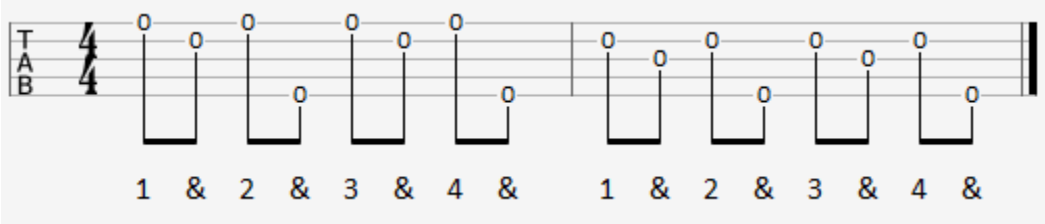
In this one-measure example we are striking the third string and then double thumbing the third string. We finish the measure with a strike strum-thumb on the second string. How would you count the beats in this example?



If you said, “1 2 & 3 4 &” then you got it right!

Drop-Thumb Rhythm

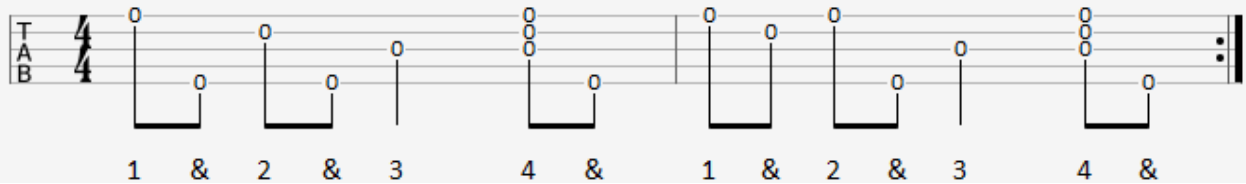
Now try the drop-thumb exercise. We will start on the first and second strings and then move to the second and third strings.



Keep in mind that numbered beats will be struck by your frailing fingernail and the “&” beats will be played by your thumb.

Play this through a few times. It may take you some time to drop-thumb on the third and second string.

Mixing Things Up



In this example we start out with double thumb before dropping into the strike strum-thumb. In the second measure we do something similar, only starting with a drop-thumb pattern.

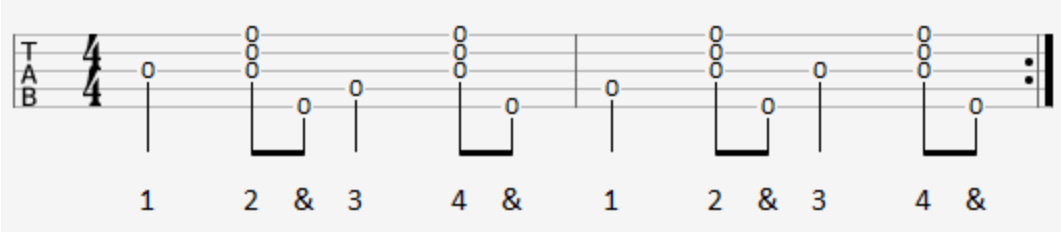
Play this through a few times at some different tempos. Notice how the strike strum-thumb at the end of each measure ties everything up?

Even though we only have the strike, the strum and the thumb to work with there are countless rhythms and phrasings we can create by blending patterns together. Experiment and see what kind of mix and match rhythms you can create on your own.

Alternating Bass Strum

If you are playing backup in a group or just playing and singing on your own it is good to be comfortable creating an alternating bass rhythm.

You will often hear guitar players using alternating bass in both fingerpicking and flatpicking. The back and forth between a high and low bass can give even the most simplistic arrangement a feeling of motion. The challenge on the banjo lies in the fact that we only have one bass string. That means we have to be creative bouncing between the third and fourth strings.



In the above example we are simply playing the strike strum-thumb pattern and bouncing back and forth between the third and fourth strings. We cannot create the precise bass lines you will find on the guitar, but this captures the feeling of that high bass/low bass rocking back and forth.

Dynamics

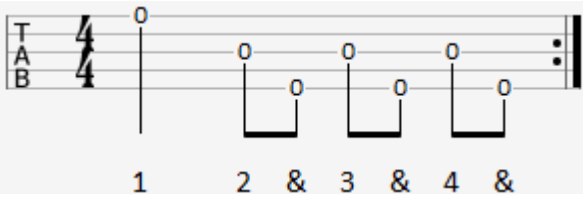
You can bring a lot of emotion into your playing with proper use of dynamics.

Dynamics is a general term for choosing what beat to accent, but it also has a lot to do with volume. Experiment with the force you use for the strike, strum and thumb. For example, you could give a hard crisp strike on the first beat and a light touch for the strum-thumb.

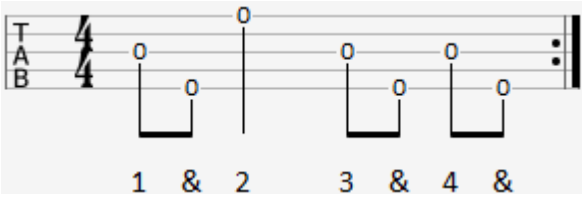
Also be aware of your hand position. Playing closer to the bridge draws a sharper tone from the banjo, while playing closer to the neck softens the sound. This is a slight change, but even slight changes in volume, emphasis and tone can bring an expressive quality into your music.

Accents

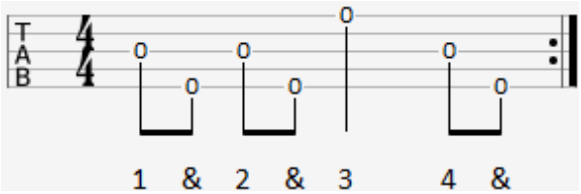
We can add emphasis to any of the four beats. Here are some simple examples of using single strikes and double thumb to add emphasis to a specific beat.



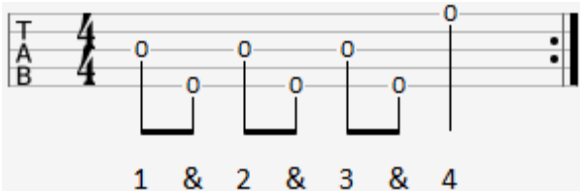
Accent on the **first** beat.



Accent on the **second** beat.



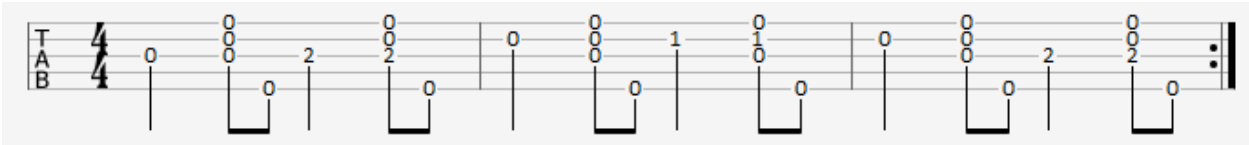
Accent on the **third** beat.



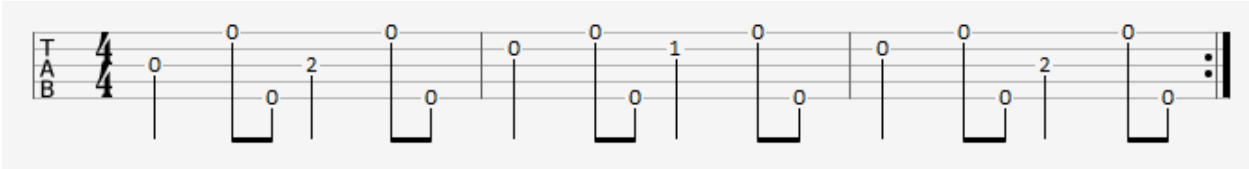
Accent on the **fourth** beat

Frailing the Scale

Here is a little exercise using part of the G major scale. The challenge is to maintain the strike strum-thumb rhythm while fretting notes.



Once you can do that smoothly, try replacing the strum with a double thumb.



Notice how taking out the strum changes the entire feel of the exercise?

As you explore rhythm play around with how much or how little you can add or take away from a song. Everybody has his or her own voice, and these rhythm tools will help you discover your “banjo voice”.

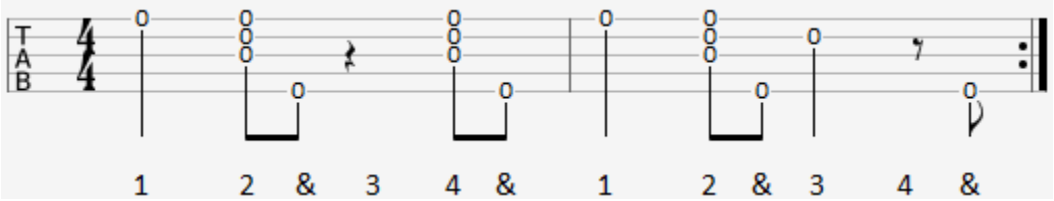
Rests

A rest is a moment of silence with the time value of a musical note.

- A **whole note rest** is held for the entire measure.
- A **half note rest** is held for half of the measure.
- A **quarter note rest** is held for – you guessed it – one quarter of the measure.
- An **eighth note rest** is held for one eighth of the measure.

It may seem odd to place a time value on silence. If you use it creatively silence can be very powerful.

The trick to playing a rest is to make the same motion as you would for the note you are replacing. This will keep your hand moving and make it easier to stay in rhythm.



In this example the first measure is played strike strum-thumb, rest strum-thumb. The second measure is played strike strum-thumb, strike rest-thumb.

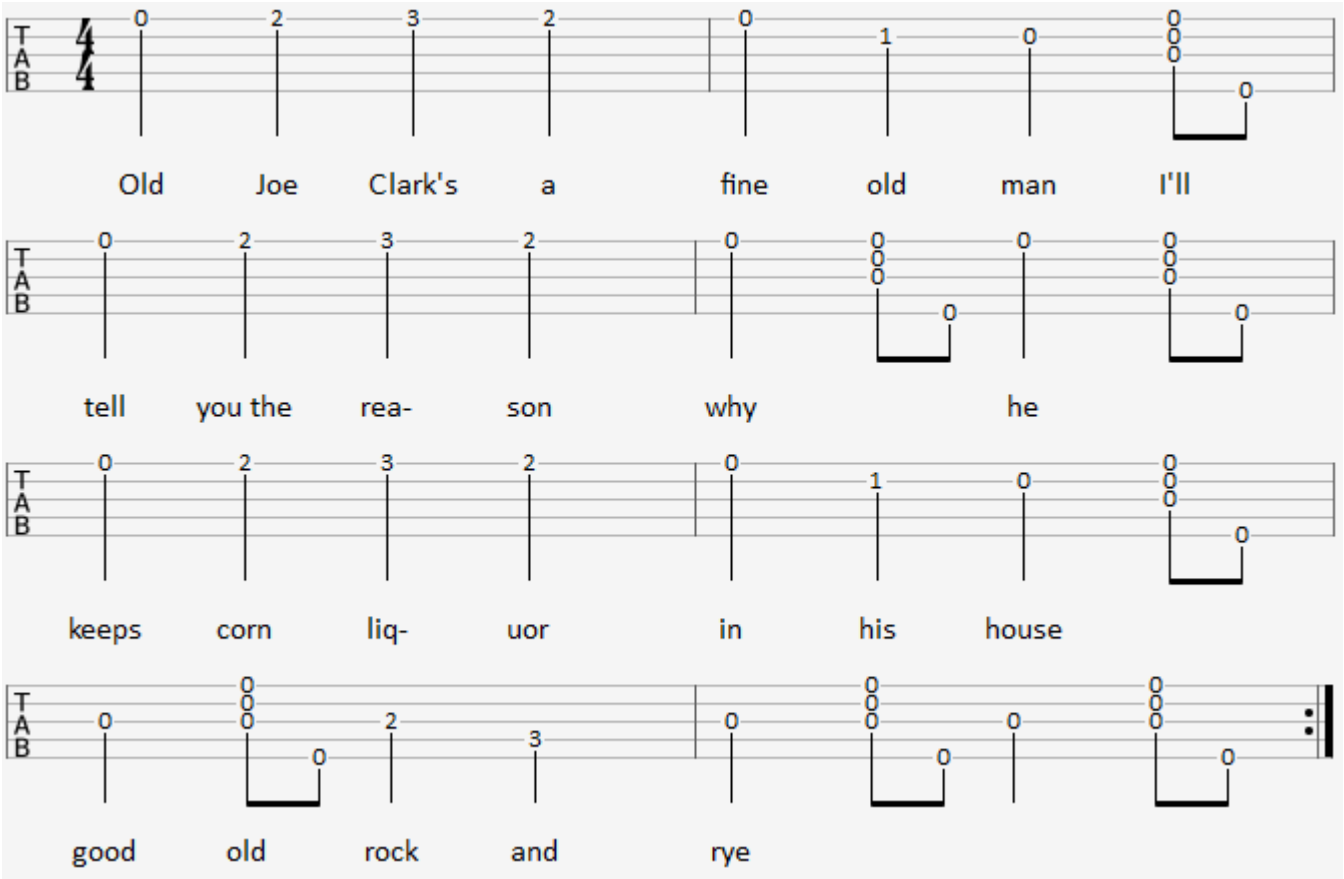
Experiment with rests and listen to the way a measured moment of silence can add excitement and interest to the simplest patterns.

Rhythm Tools in a Song

Remember “Old Joe Clark” in the last chapter? Here is the verse of that song written out in banjo tablature.

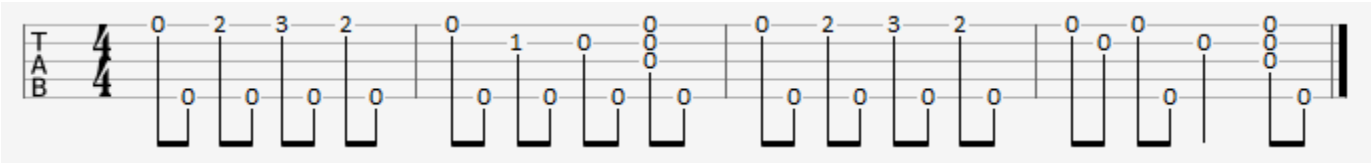
Old Joe Clark – Verse

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning.



The song works really well just using strikes and strums, but what if we added double thumb or even drop-thumb?

Here are the first four measures:



How would you arrange the rest of “Old Joe Clark” using the rhythm tools we discussed in this chapter?

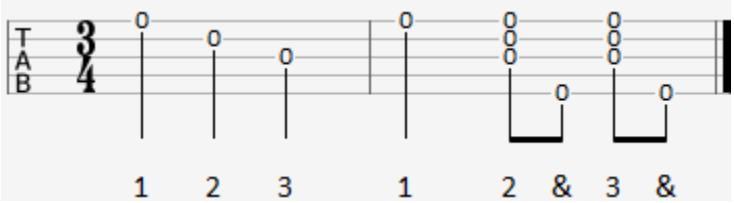
Rhythm in 3/4 Time

In 3/4 time we are working within a framework of three beats per measure.

3/4 time is sometimes referred to as “waltz time” because so many beautiful waltzes have been composed with this time signature.

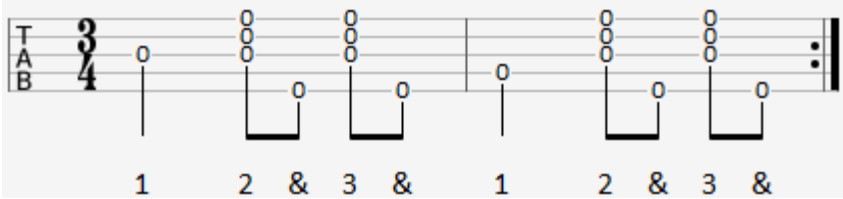
The banjo is capable of great beauty, and 3/4 time can bring out the best in a banjo player. I love how expressive the banjo can be in 3/4 time.

Simple 3/4 Rhythm Patterns



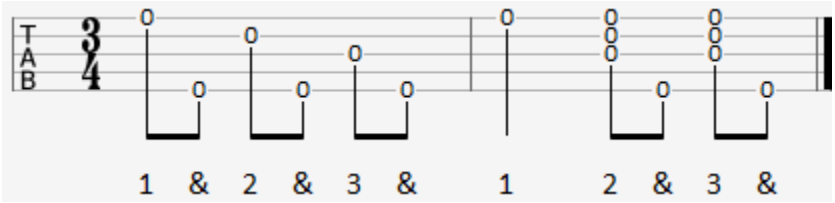
The two most common rhythm patterns for 3/4 time are three single strikes (for three beats) or a single strike followed by *two* strum-thumbs.

The strike double strum-thumb pattern is surprisingly effective. You can create flowing melodies or use the alternating bass pattern for vocal back-up.



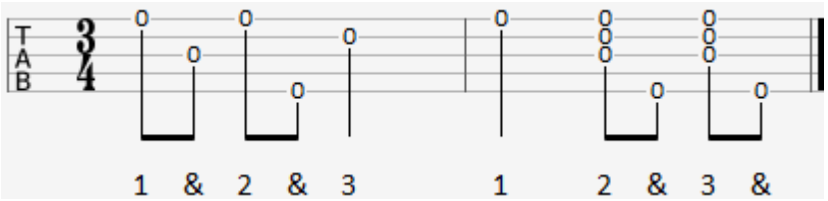
Double Thumb in 3/4 Time

Double thumb is extremely effective in 3/4 time.



Drop-Thumb in 3/4 Time

Drop thumb is also effective in 3/4 time. Just be aware that the drop-thumb pattern usually covers two beats, so you will want to finish off the measure somehow.



Overview

In this chapter we explored how the three mechanical elements of frailing banjo (the strike, the strum and the thumb) can be used in 4/4 and 3/4 time to create exciting rhythm patterns.

We discussed the difference between **rhythm** and **tempo**.

We discussed **time signatures** and **note values**.

- **4/4 time** = four beats per measure with each beat having a quarter note value.
- **3/4 time** = three beats per measure with each beat having a quarter note value

Be sure to practice these examples faithfully before moving on. In the next chapter we start playing chords!

Your First Chord

In this chapter we will explore:

- ***The D7 Chord***
- ***Chord Exercises***
- ***Go Tell Aunt Rhody***

Up to this point we have mostly focused on the picking hand. Now it is time to begin adding in some fretting hand techniques.

Chords are an important part of frailing banjo. They help you add harmonies to solo playing, backup for vocals and with some advanced techniques chords can even add a rhythmic element into the mix.

Before we start putting our fingers in place to form our first chord shape, take a moment to check your posture.

Remember the photograph of my dad showing proper banjo playing posture? Well here it is again. Notice that he is sitting with his back straight, banjo centered on his lap, banjo supported by a strap with the neck angled so that the fifth string peg is close to his ear. His picking hand is in position for frailing and his fretting hand is lightly touching the fretboard.

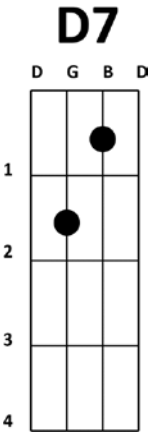
This posture is very important. It will help your picking hand access the strings and put your fretting hand in positon to form chords without any stress.

Not like this!

Like this!

Now I want you to put the pad of your thumb on the centerline of the back of the banjo neck. Keeping your thumb in position, move your entire arm until your hand is in a position where your fingertips can drop straight down on the strings. Do not stretch your fingers out, twist your wrist or try to reach across the fretboard. You want to be able to drop your fingers straight down on the strings.

Place your index finger on the second string at the first fret. Your fingertip should be on the wood of the fretboard, just above the wire of the fret.

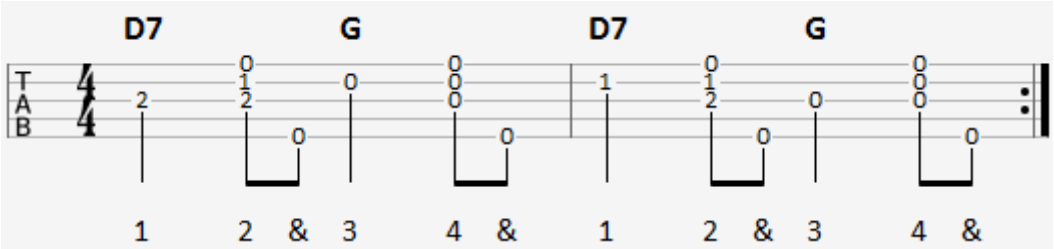


When you fret a string your fingertip pushes the string down on the fretboard until the string makes solid contact with the fret. When you strike a fretted string it vibrates from the bridge to the fretwire. Because fretting a string actually shortens the length of the string it vibrates at a higher pitch – and that is why fretting below the fifth fret is referred to as playing, “up the neck”.

After you fret the second string at the first fret, strike the string to make sure it is ringing clearly. If not, adjust your finger and hand accordingly. Once you get a clear note place your middle finger on the third string at the second fret. Make sure both strings are ringing clearly.

Congratulations! You have just made a D7 chord!

Play a strike strum-thumb holding the D7 chord and then let go of this chord and play a strike strum-thumb out of the open G chord. Repeat this over and over until you can form the chord effortlessly.

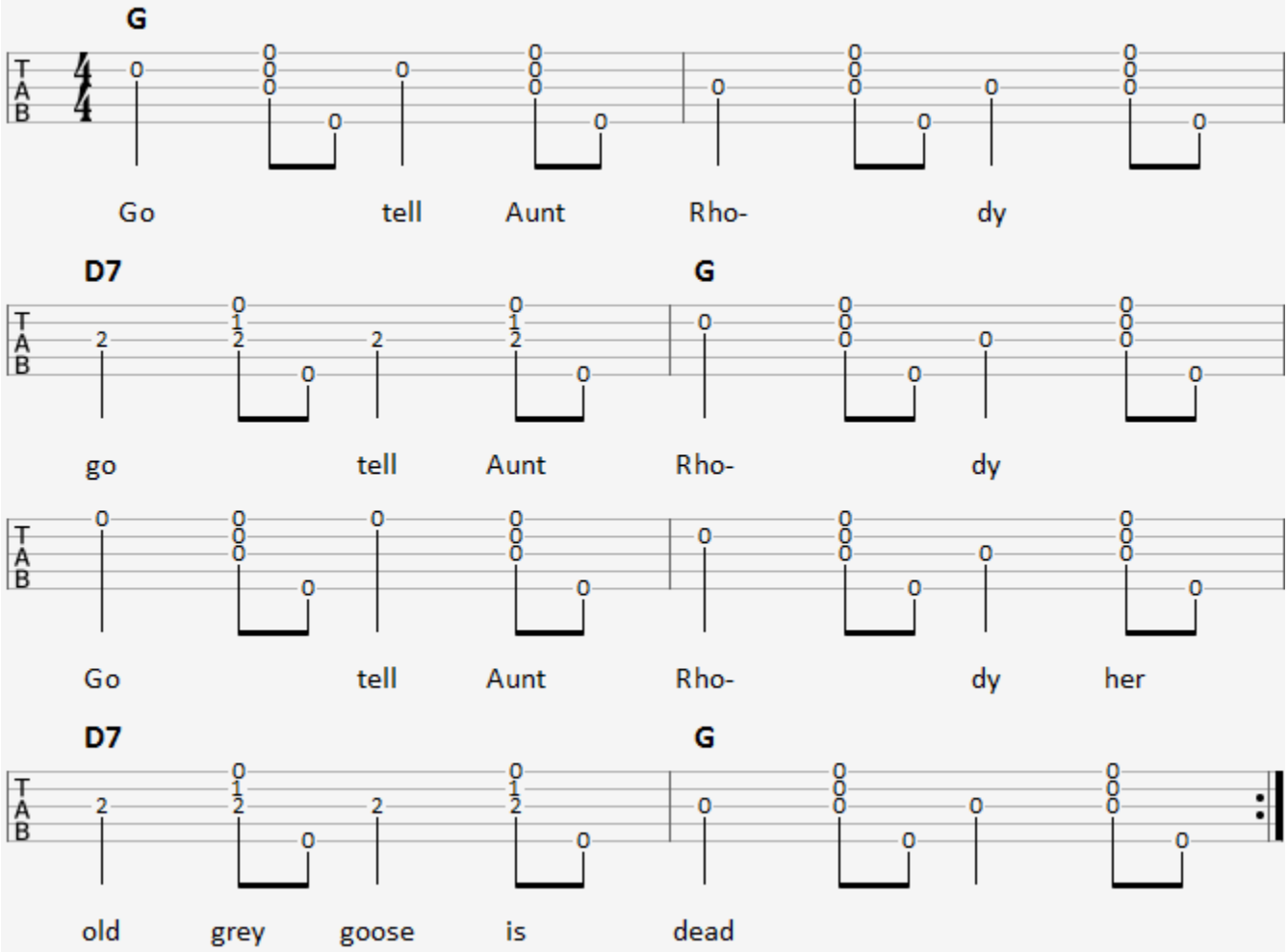


Once you can comfortably grab the D7 chord without losing rhythm the next step is to try playing and singing a song.

Let's take a look at "Go Tell Aunt Rhody". Play through this and sing along.

Go Tell Aunt Rhody – Rhythm

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning.



In this first tablature we are using the strike strum-thumb pattern to play a steady rhythm that flows along with the chord progression. We are not worrying about playing melody notes, but we are taking the trouble to play the strike on a note that will harmonize with the vocal melody.

Once you can play and sing the song in the tablature, go ahead and sing a few more verses.

Go tell Aunt Rhody,
Go tell Aunt Rhody,
Go tell Aunt Rhody,
Her old gray goose is dead.

The one she's been saving,
The one she's been saving,
The one she's been saving
To make a feather bed.

She left nine young goslings,
She left nine young goslings,
She left nine young goslings,
To scratch for their own bread.

The goslings are mourning,
The goslings are mourning,
The goslings are mourning,
Because their mother's dead.

The old gander's weeping,
The old gander's weeping,
The old gander's weeping,
Because his wife is dead.

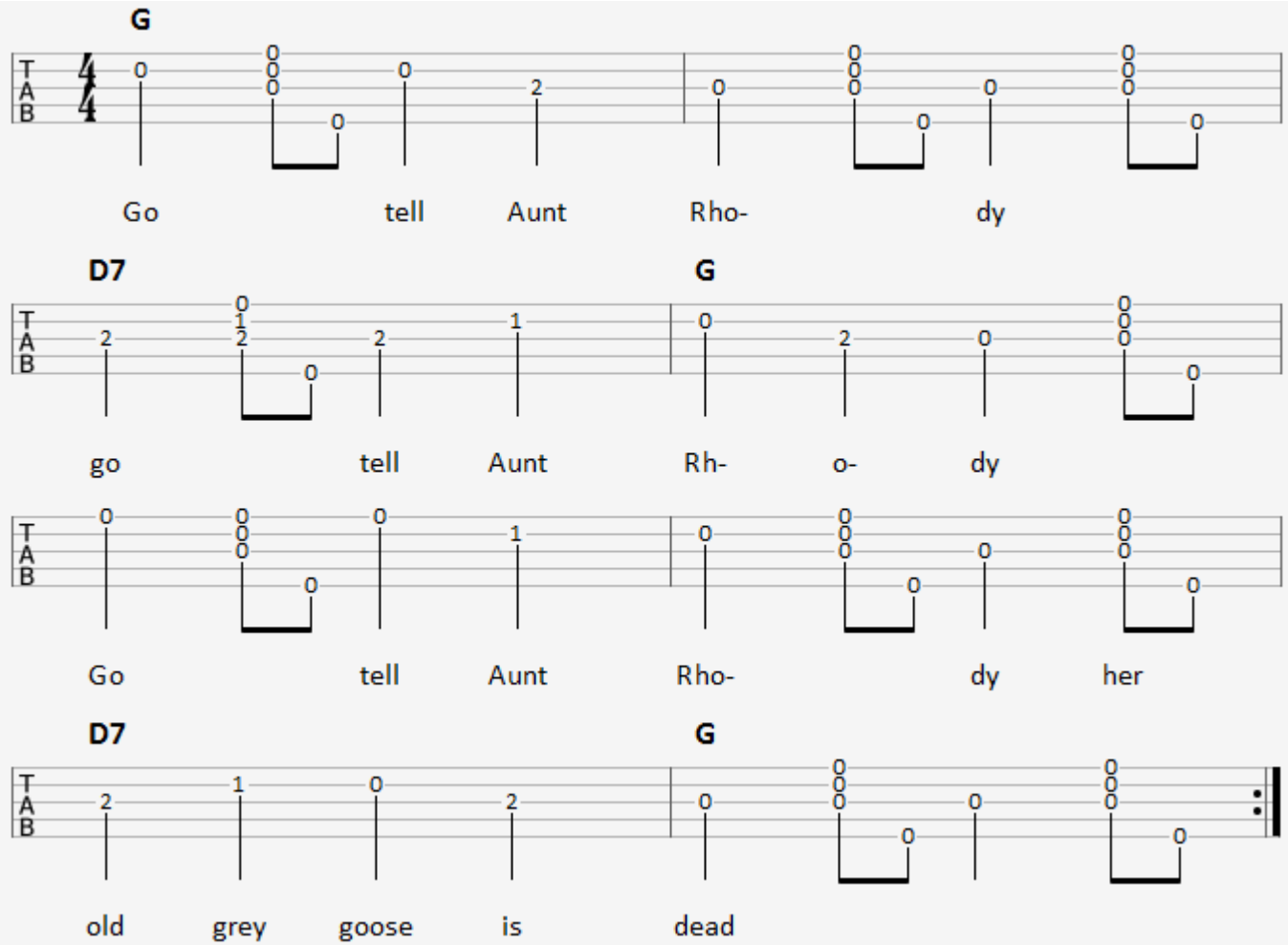
She died in the mill pond,
She died in the mill pond,
She died in the mill pond
From standing on her head.

Once you can play and sing “Go Tell Aunt Rhody” try to play the melody.

I have included the lyrics in this tablature as a reference. When you are starting out I really don’t recommend trying to play melody when you are singing. When I was just starting out Peggy Seeger advised me to, “Keep it simple” when I was playing and singing. That advice has served me well. A simple arrangement like the one above works for singing because the banjo is not fighting your voice. In this next version, let’s let the banjo take over the melody.

Go Tell Aunt Rhody – Melody

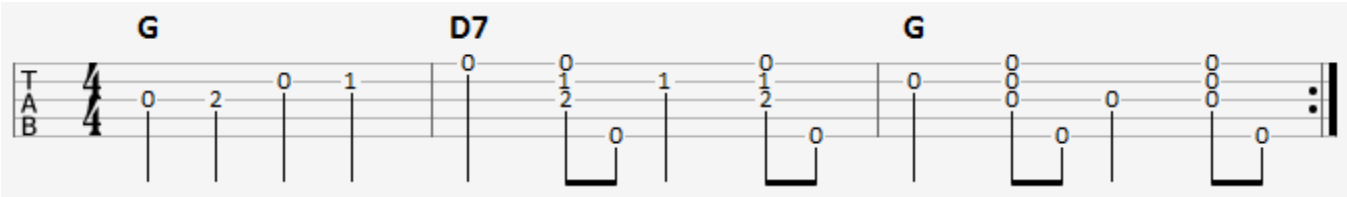
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning.



Take a long hard look at the way the melody notes in this song seem to follow the shape of the D7 chord. Now go back a few pages and look at the **Frailing the Scale** exercise. Do you see a repeating pattern? If not, look again.

Here is another little D7 chord exercise to work on.

D7 Chord Exercise



Make sure you can effortlessly switch between the open G and D7 chords before you move on to the next chapter.

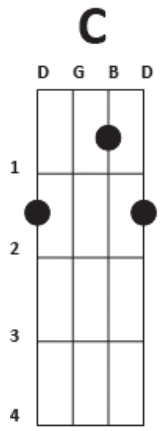
The C Chord

In this chapter we will explore:

- ***The C Chord***
- ***Chord Change Exercises***
- ***Roving Gambler***
- ***The Am Chord***
- ***Passing Chords***
- ***Handsome Molly***

The next chord we are going to play is the C chord.

The D7 chord is a two-finger chord. The C chord is slightly more challenging in that we use three fingers.



Place your index finger on the second string at the first fret. Your fingertip should be on the wood of the fretboard, just above the wire of the fret.

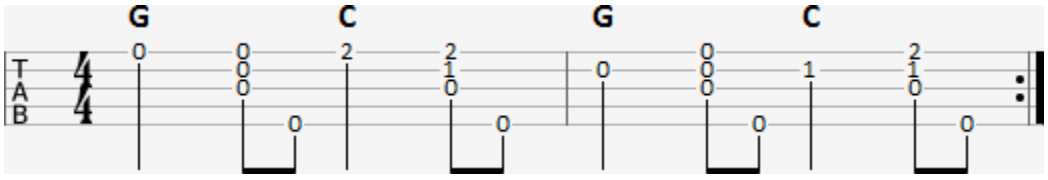
Place your middle finger on the fourth string at the second fret.

Place your ring finger on the first string at the second fret.

The challenge when you first learn the C chord is to get a clean note from both the fretted and open strings. Sometimes banjo students run into trouble with the middle finger on the fourth string muting the open third string. You can avoid this by making sure that you are not reaching or stretching your fingers across the fretboard. You want your fingers to come straight down on the strings like a piston. To do this make sure you are sitting and holding the banjo as described in earlier chapters. Place the pad of your thumb on the centerline of the back of the banjo neck. Keeping your thumb in place move your entire arm until your hand is in a position where your fingertips can drop straight down on the strings. While holding the C chord, strum across the four long strings of your banjo. Listen carefully to make sure each string ringing clearly. If there is a string that sounds muffled or muted reposition your hand, arm and fingers until each string rings clear.

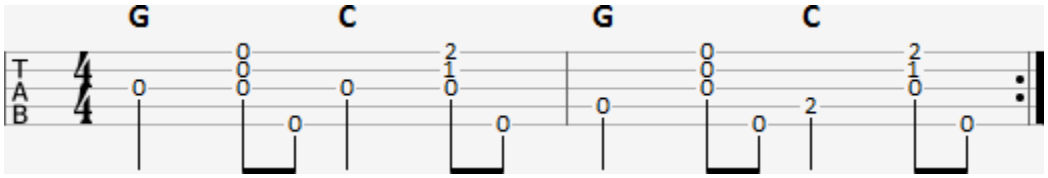
Let's try alternating from the open G chord to the C chord.

In this first example please notice that we are not playing the fourth string at all. In cases like this you can play a partial chord and leave the fourth string open.



Partial chords can make it easier in the beginning, but be sure to keep practicing the full chord. You never know when you will need that bass note.

Now let's practice the C chord with a focus on the third and fourth strings. This time around you should use the full C chord.



Practice these drills slowly and methodically. The "trick" to playing chord changes smoothly is practice.

Now, when I say practice I don't mean to work as if you were studying to pass a test. No, the type of practice I am talking about requires a bit more time than a night cramming before finals.

When you walk, do you think about all of the different body motions that are required to stand upright and take a step?

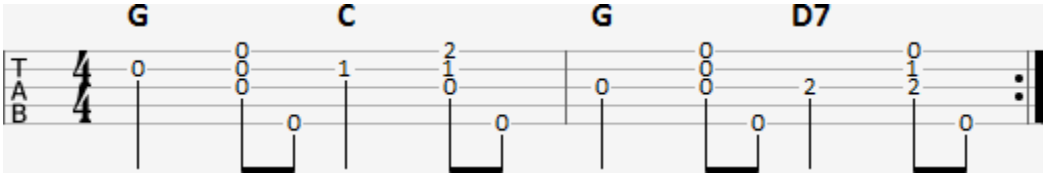
When you ride a bicycle do you think about how you are shifting your balance to stay on two wheels?

Of course you don't. If you try to analyze taking a step or pedaling through the park you would fall over. In fact, when you were learning to walk and learning to ride you did fall over quite a bit. When we learned how to walk we fell over many times but continued to get up and try again. Over time we learned how to take a few steps and then, with more time and repetition we not only were able to walk easily we also stopped thinking about "how" we were walking.

In playing the banjo we have to apply that try, try and try again approach. It is not enough to put our fingers in place to form a chord. We have to practice until we can finger chords instinctively. No thought. Only proper action.

So practice those drills until they are smooth, and then practice them some more.

As you get comfortable with the G and C chords add D7 into the mix.

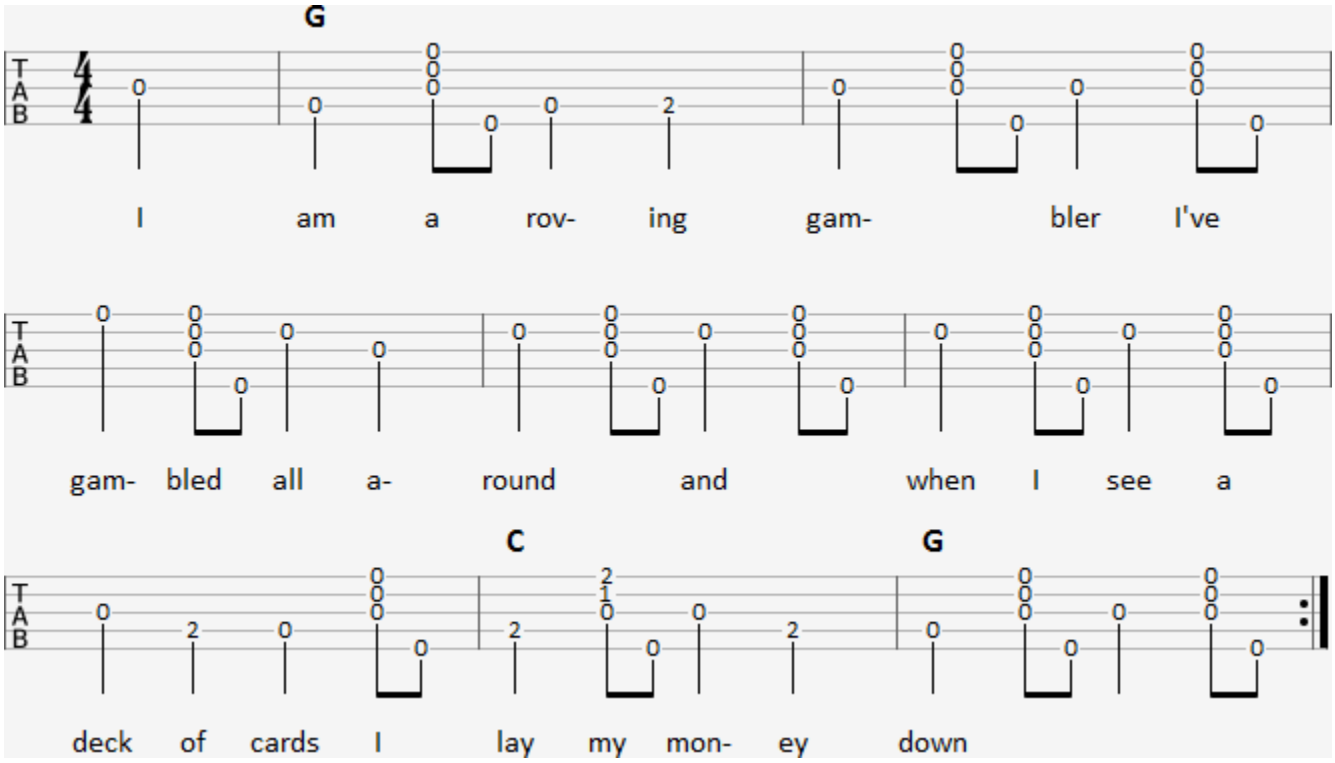


Now let's try the song "Roving Gambler". The first thing you will notice about this song is that the first measure has only one note. This is called a pick-up note. It works to kick off the song. You play it at the beginning of the tune, but skip over it as you repeat the song.

In music notation we would handle pick-up notes differently, but in banjo tablature we need to keep the rhythm going so the pick-up notes do not repeat at the end of the song. You will also notice that we are mixing in melody with the frailing pattern. Play this song as written a few times and then experiment with it. Try playing a simpler version as you sing and look for ways to dress up the song as an instrumental.

Roving Gambler

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning.



I am a roving gambler, I gamble all around
when I see a deck of cards I lay my money down.

I've gambled down in Washington, I've gambled over in Spain
I'm going down to Georgia to gamble my last game.

I had not been in Washington not many more weeks than three
when I fell in love with a pretty little gal, she fell in love with me.

She took me to her parlor, she cooled me with her fan
she whispered low in her mother's ear, "I love that gambling man."

"Oh daughter, Oh dear daughter, how can you treat me so?
To leave your dear old mother, and with a gambler go?"

"Oh mother, Oh dear mother, you know I love you well
but the love I have for this gambling man, no human tongue can tell."

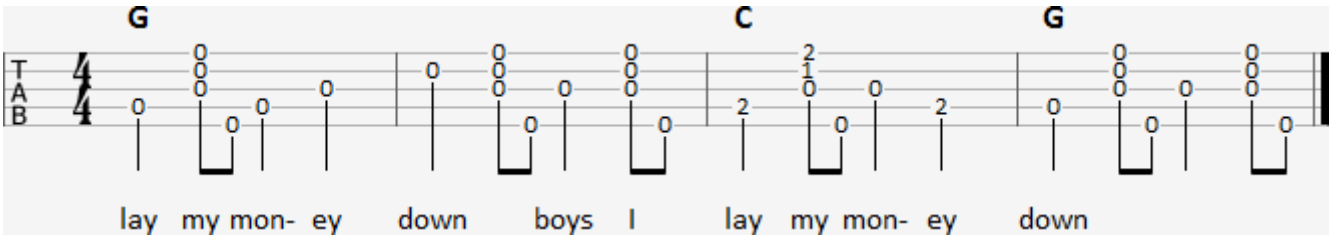
"Oh mother, Oh dear mother, I'll tell you if I can
if you ever see me back again, it'll be with that gambling man."

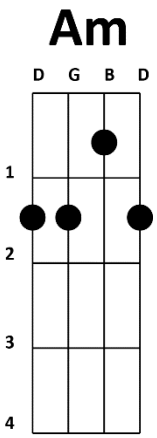
Some versions of "Roving Gambler" repeat the last line of each verse as a sort of chorus. That is part of the fun of folk music. Everybody has his or her own version of every song.

If you would like to try it yourself, the chorus after the first verse would be something like this:

Roving Gambler Alternate Chorus

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning.

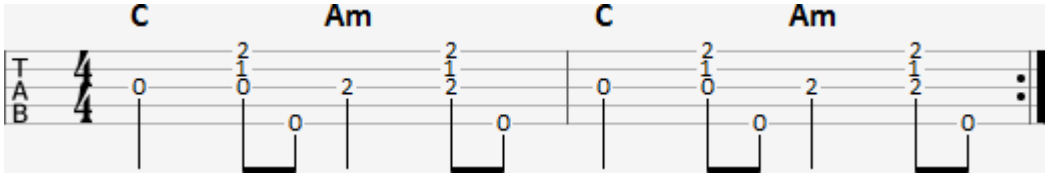




Remember what I said about letting the third string ring clear while holding the C chord? Well, our next song has a chord where you make the normal C chord shape, but use your middle finger to fret the fourth and third strings simultaneously.

This gives you an Am (A minor) chord.

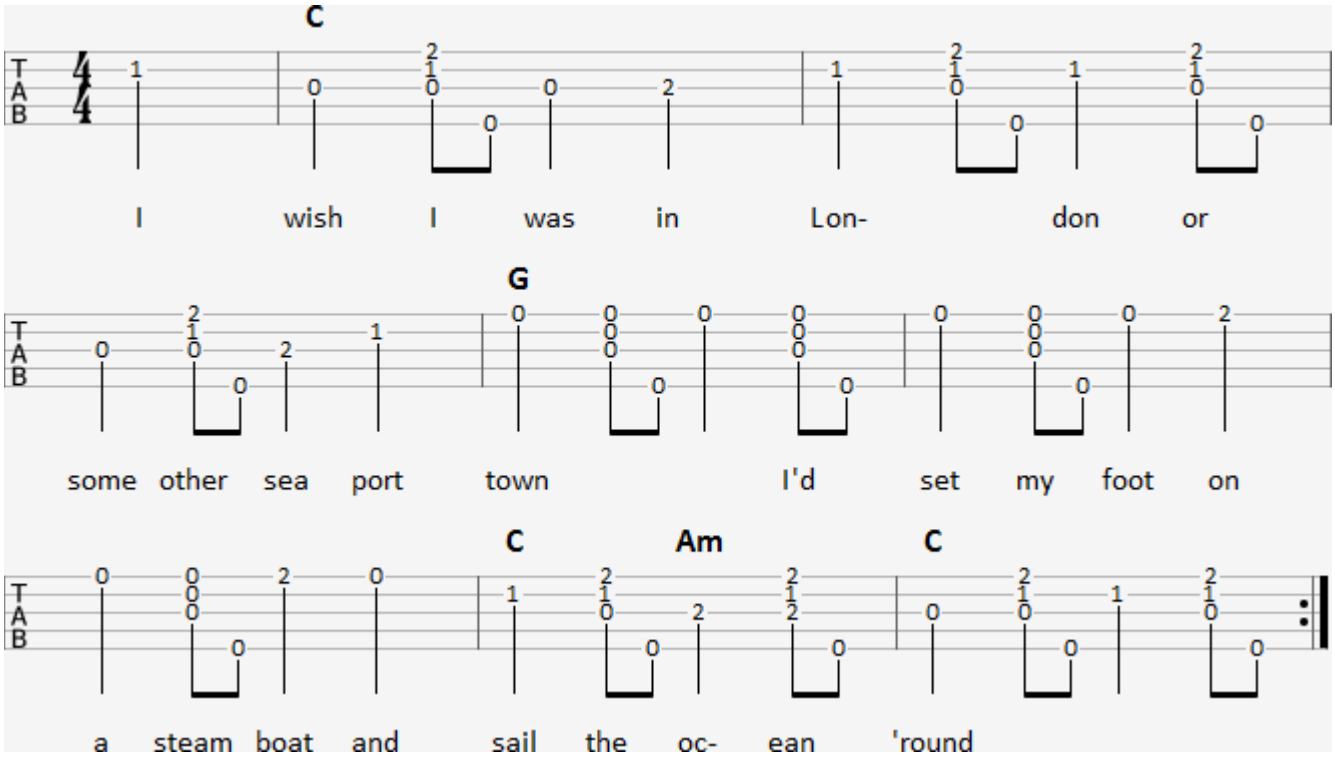
Try Switching between C and Am a few times. Practice this until you can make the chord change smoothly.



Now we will use the Am chord shape in the great old song "Handsome Molly".

Handsome Molly

4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning.



I wish was in London
Or some other seaport town
Step my foot in a steamboat
And sail the ocean round

Sailing round the ocean
Sailing round the sea
I'd think of Handsome Molly
Wherever she may be

I saw her at church last Sunday
She passed me on by
I knew her mind was changing
By the roving of her eye

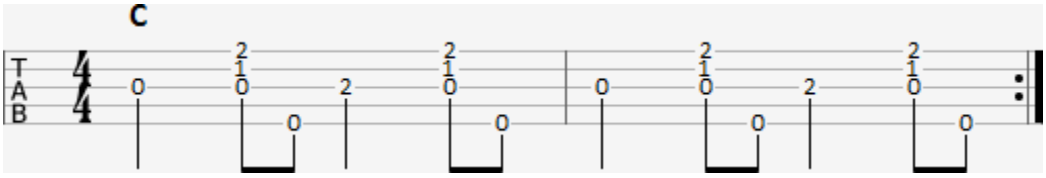
By the roving of her eye
By the roving of her eye
I knew her mind was changing
By the roving of her eye

Now do you remember Molly
When you give me your right hand
You said if you ever married
That I would be your man

That I would be your man
That I would be your man
You said if you ever married
That I would be your man

Quick Change

Another thing to practice is holding a C chord and fretting the third string at the second fret for one beat. This will come up a lot when you start playing more melodies. The trick is take your middle finger off of the fourth string to fret the third for the strike and then return when you strum the chord.



The F Chord

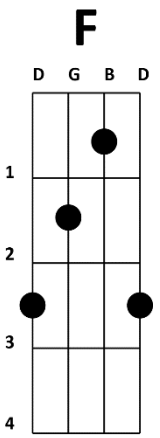
In this chapter we will explore:

- ***The F Chord***
- ***Chord Change Exercises***
- ***Boil 'em Cabbage Down***
- ***Playing Up The Neck***

Now it is time to take a crack at the F chord.

The F chord is a closed chord. That means we fret all four strings to form the chord. This is an important distinction - not only because we need to use good fretting technique to keep all four strings ringing clearly, but also because the closed shape is *moveable*. We will explore how chords work in detail in an upcoming volume of this series, but for right now keep in mind that closed chords can be moved around the fretboard with each new placement resulting in a different chord. That means when you are learning the F chord, you are actually learning lots of other chords at the same time! How cool is that?

The principle of strategy is having one thing, to know ten thousand things.
— *Musashi Miyamoto, The Book of Five Rings*



Let's begin working on the F chord by starting with what we know.

Make a C chord and look at the placement of your fingers as you are holding the C chord. Index finger on the second string at the first fret, middle finger is on the fourth string at the second fret and ring finger on the first string at the second fret.

Keep your index finger on the second string at the first fret.

Move your middle finger from the fourth string at the second fret to the third string at the second fret.

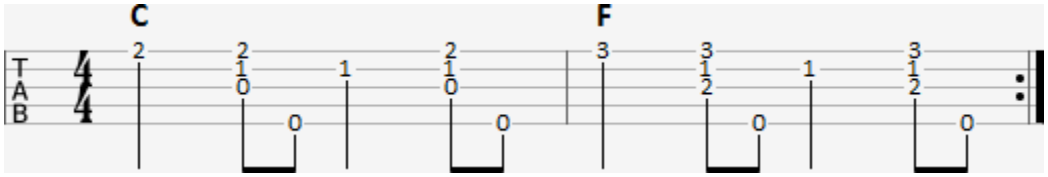
Move your ring finger from the first string at the second fret to the fourth string at the third fret.

Place the little finger on the first string at the third fret.

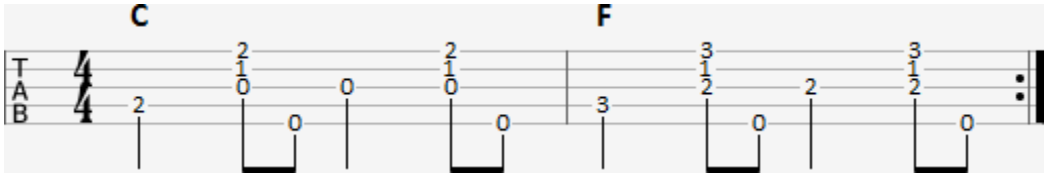
That's it! You have made an F chord.

As we did in the previous chapter with the C chord take a moment to make sure that each string is ringing clearly.

Let's practice changing between the C and F chords. Just as we did in the last chapter, notice that we are not playing the fourth string at all. In cases like this you can play a partial chord and leave the fourth string open.



Once you can play that smoothly try working with the third and fourth strings. You will need to use the whole chord form for this exercise.

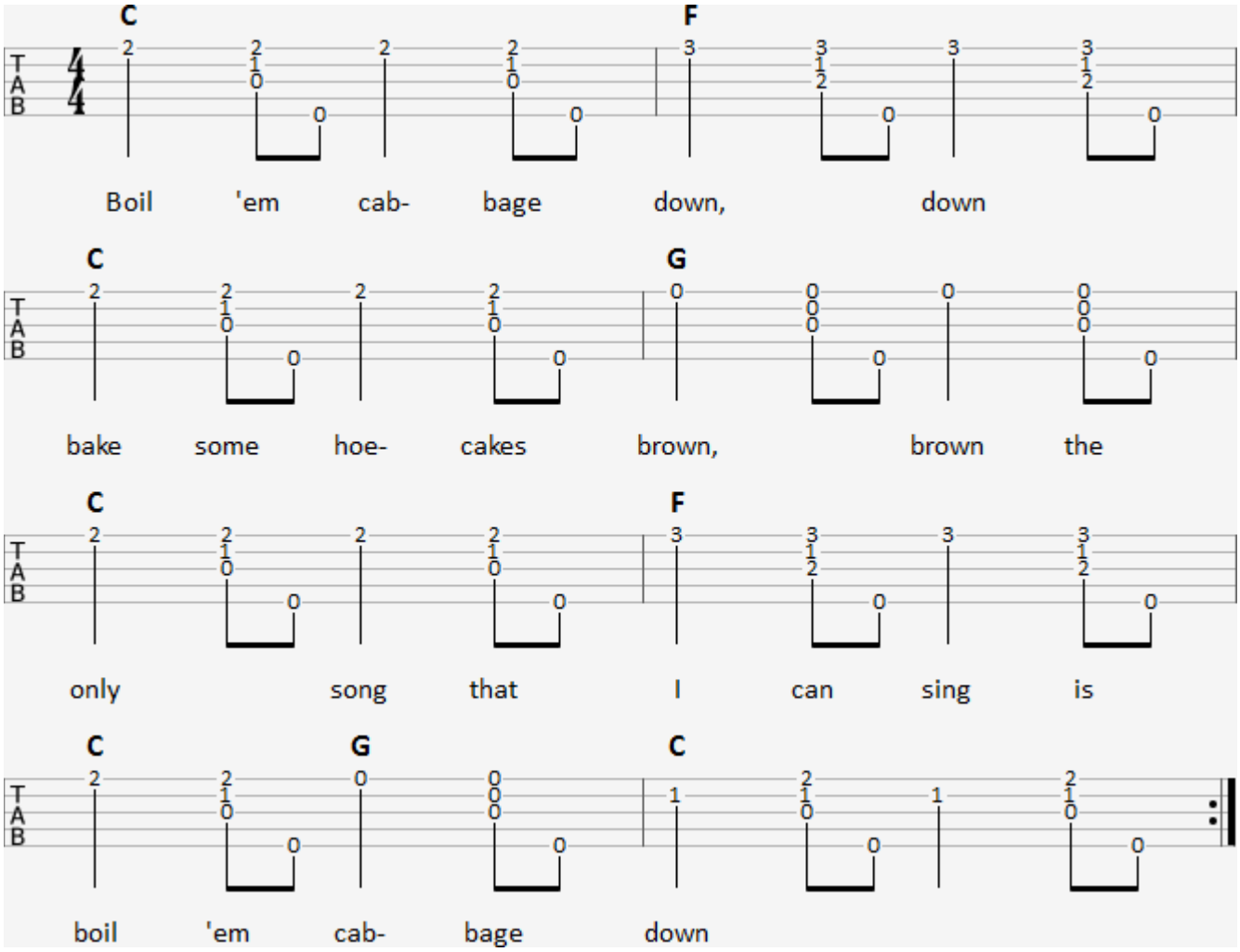


Once you start to get comfortable changing between the C and F chords we can use those same chords in a song.

“Boil ‘em Cabbage Down” is a funky little tune with an almost endless number of verses. When my father and I are giving banjo lessons in-person this is usually the first song we teach because almost the entire song is played on the first string. Once you are playing and singing, have fun searching for additional verses.

Boil ‘em Cabbage Down

4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning.



Went up on a mountain
To give my horn a blow, blow.
Thought I heard my true love say,
"Yonder comes my beau."

CHORUS:

Boil them cabbage down, down.
Turn them hoecakes 'round, 'round.
The only song that I can sing is
Boil them cabbage down.

Possum in a 'simmon tree,
Raccoon on the ground.
Raccoon says, you son-of-a-gun,
Shake some 'simmons down.

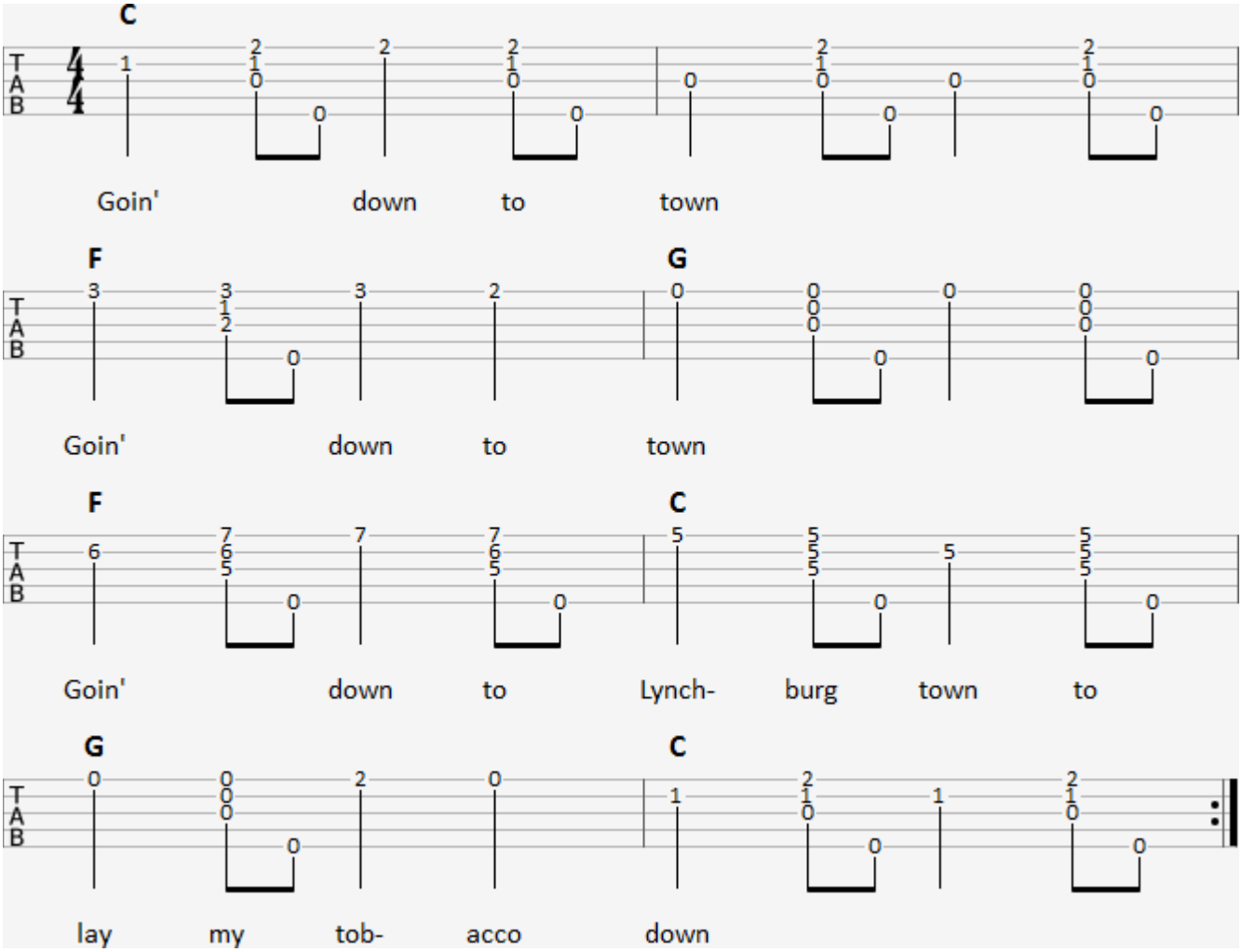
(Chorus)

Someone stole my old coon dog.
Wish they'd bring him back.
He chased the big hogs through the fence,
And the little ones through the crack.

Not long after I had started to play “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down” smoothly, I heard my father playing a beautiful melody. It started out just like “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down” but then went up in pitch. The song was called “Lynchburg Town”. My father taught me the song and now I am sharing it with you.

Lynchburg Town

4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning.



Going down to town,
Going down to town,
Going down to Lynchburg Town,
To lay my tobacco down.

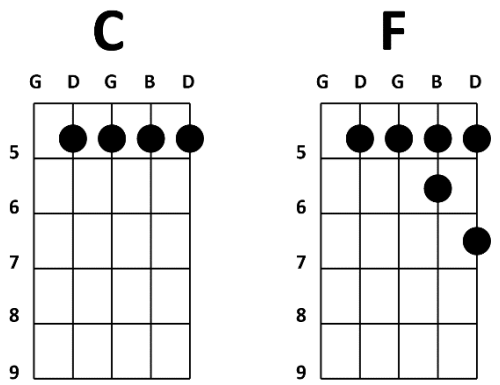
Times a-getting hard,
Money getting scarce,
Pay me for my tobacco, boys,
So I can leave this place.

I went down to town
And went into the store,
Every pretty girl in that town
Came running to the door.

Last time I saw my girl,
She was standing in the door,
Her shoes and stockings in her hand
Her bare feet on the floor.

“Lynchburg Town”, like almost every song in this book has many verses. Some describe the African American experience in the post-Civil War South in painful detail. I have not included them here, but I encourage you to do some research on your own. Diving into books and recordings to learn the history behind songs is a big part of being a folk musician.

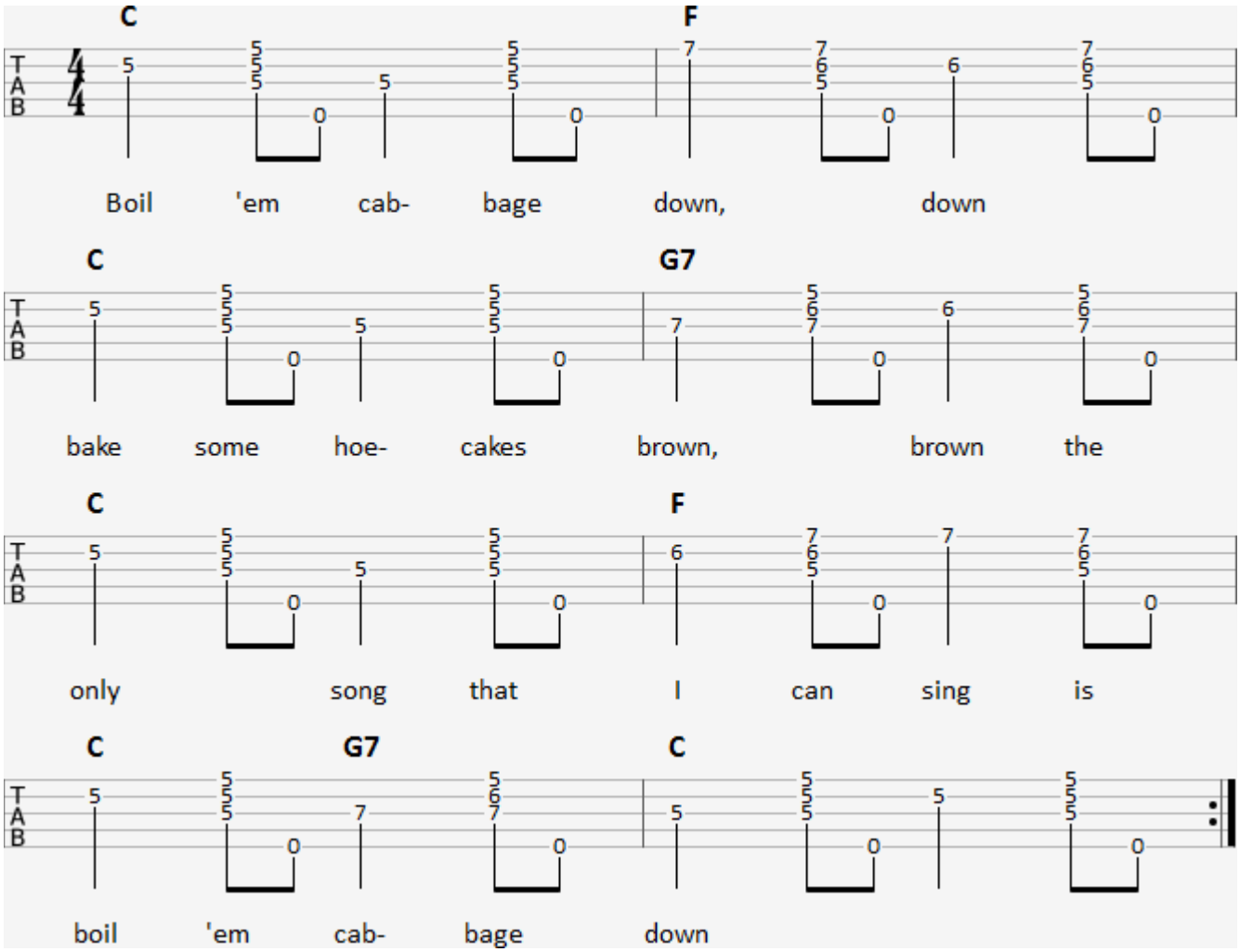
The first four measures of “Lynchburg Town” are simple enough, but all of a sudden we are playing an F chord in the fifth measure and a C chord in the sixth that have unfamiliar fingerings. This is our first foray into playing up the neck. We call it playing up the neck because the notes go up in pitch. The C chord is played as a barre chord and as the name implies we form that chord by laying our index finger across the strings like a bar. While holding the barre C chord we get the F by fingering a partial C chord shape with the ring and middle fingers.



IF we play the D7 shape while holding the barre C chord we get a G7. So why not try “Boil ‘em Cabbage Down using these up the neck chords?

Boil ‘em Cabbage Down – Up The Neck

4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning.



Hammers, Pulls and Slides

In this chapter we are going to explore three techniques for the fretting hand that can make even the simplest song exciting.

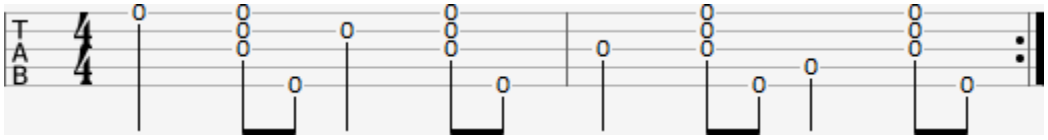
In this chapter we will explore:

- ***Hammer-on***
- ***Pull-off***
- ***Slides***
- ***Old Joe Clark***
- ***Cripple Creek***

A Quick Review

Before we begin exploring fretting hand techniques make sure that you have good control of the picking hand.

Here is a little exercise for the strike strum and thumb pattern.



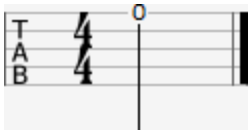
In this exercise we are playing a quarter note and two eighth notes rhythm. The count for each of the two measures is "One, two and three, four and".

Take a moment to practice this and get it flowing at a nice steady pace before moving on to the next exercise.

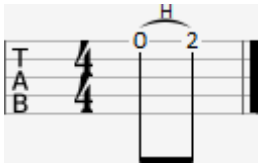
Hammer-On

A hammer-on is exactly what the name sounds like. We literally hammer a fretting hand finger onto a string to produce a note. In its most basic application a hammer-on simply cuts quarter notes in half by literally hammering your finger on a struck string.

Start out by striking the first string and count "One".

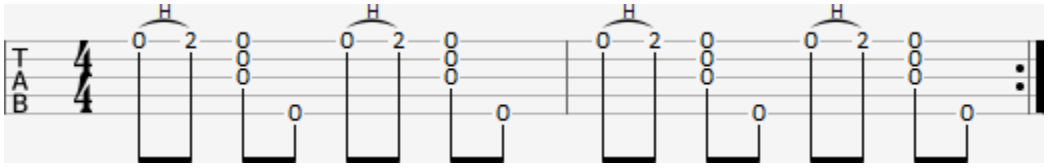


While the string is still ringing drop the middle finger of your fretting hand on the second fret and count "and".



The hammer should be almost as loud as the struck string. You don't want to hammer so forcefully that you hurt your finger, but there should be enough power in the move to get the string ringing. Also experiment with how long you maintain pressure after the hammer. Steady pressure will maintain the ringing of the string, while a quick release of pressure will give a muted or staccato effect.

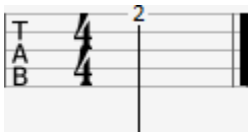
Try mixing the hammer while keeping a steady rhythm. The picking hand is playing a strike strum thumb pattern while the fretting hand is hammering on the first string at the second fret. The hammer cuts the quarter note in half, so our count becomes "one and two and three and four and" in both measures.



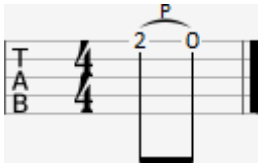
Pull-Off

A pull-off is almost the reverse of a hammer-on. Your finger snaps off a fretted string. The key word here is “snap”. For a pull-off to be effective you must pull your finger away from the fretted string so that it rings as loud as a struck string.

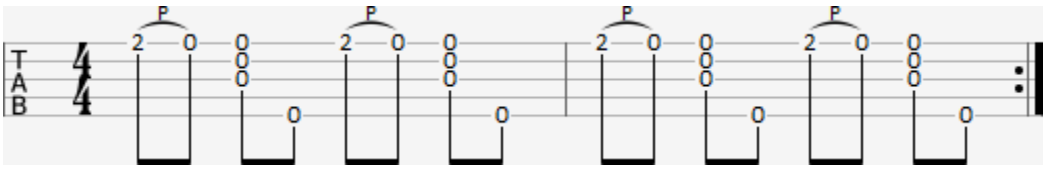
Start by fretting the first string on the second fret with the middle finger of your fretting hand and playing a quarter note strike with your picking hand. Count “one”.



While the first string is still ringing snap your middle finger off the second fret. This should be loud enough to create a new note. Count “and”.



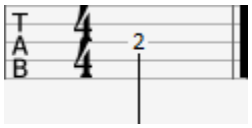
Try mixing the pull-off with a steady rhythm. The picking hand is playing a strike strum thumb pattern while the fretting hand is pulling-off the first string at the second fret. The pull-off cuts the quarter note in half, so our count becomes “one and two and three and four and” in both measures.



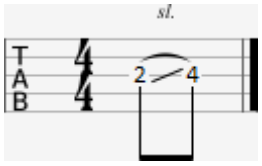
Slides

A slide is just what it sounds like. Fretting a string and sliding up or down the neck to change its pitch.

Fret the third string at the second fret with your middle finger. Play a quarter note strike with your picking hand.



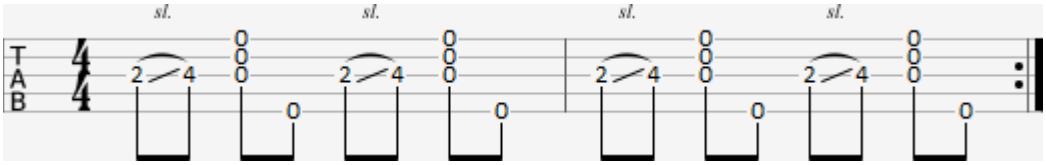
While the string is still ringing, drag your finger from the second fret up the neck to the fourth fret. It is important to maintain constant pressure on the string during the strike, the slide and after the slide. The goal is for the string to still be ringing after the slide.



As I said, the trick to playing good slides is to maintain a constant steady pressure. You don’t want to mash down on the string hard enough to hurt your finger, but with enough force to get good tone.

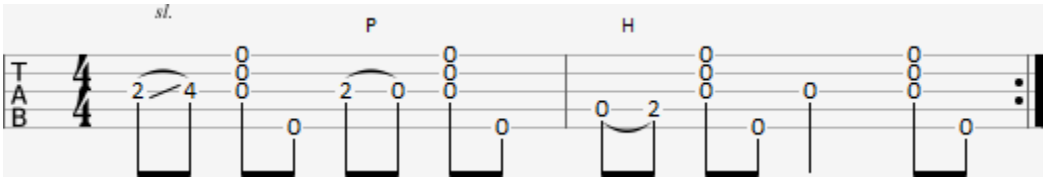
Slides can work in either direction. Try reversing the last example, sliding down the neck from the fourth fret to the second. Keep in mind that musicians use the term up the neck to describe going up in pitch like from the second to the fourth fret. Reversing that would result in going down in pitch so that would be going down the neck.

Mixing slides into the strike strum thumb pattern can be tricky to count. In tablature a slide is written out as two eighth notes. If you listen carefully this is not really happening. By maintaining a constant pressure on the fretted string and sliding up or down the neck we are really just playing a single quarter note. We shift pitch during the quarter note, but it is still a single note. With that in mind try playing slides with the strike strum thumb pattern counting “One two and three four and” for both measures.



Mix and Match

Try mixing up the techniques we have explored in this chapter. In this exercise we have a slide, pull-off and hammer-on mixed into a strike strum thumb pattern. The picking hand plays the strike strum thumb throughout while the fretting hand changes the timing and phrasing.



What would the count be for these two measures?

Using Hammers and Pulls in a Song

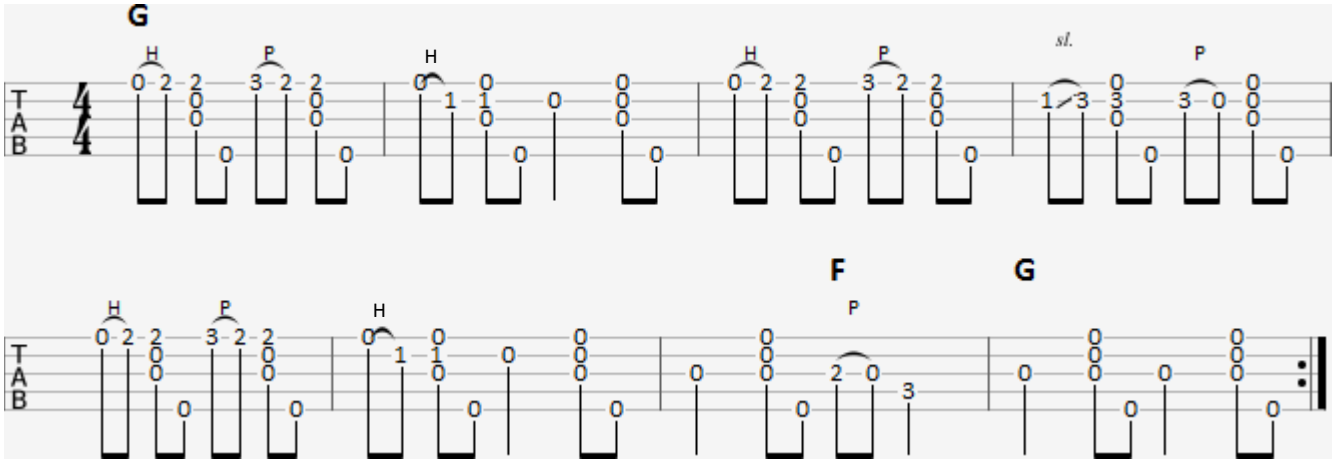
Hammers and pulls are great tools for adding expression and excitement into your playing.

Let’s add these effects to “Old Joe Clark”. Up to this point we have played the melody with quarter note strikes and with double thumbing. Now we can add hammers, slides and pulls into the mix.

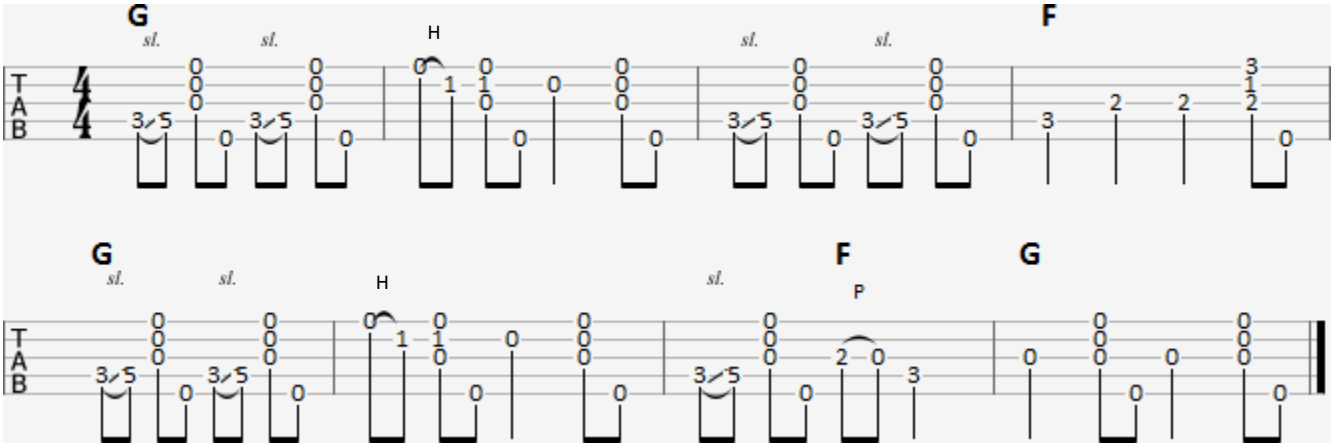
You will notice in the second measure that we strike the first string and hammer the second string at the first fret. This is a phantom hammer-on. We will discuss phantom effects in upcoming volumes of this series.

Old Joe Clark – Pimped Up – Verse

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning.



Old Joe Clark – Pimped Up – Chorus

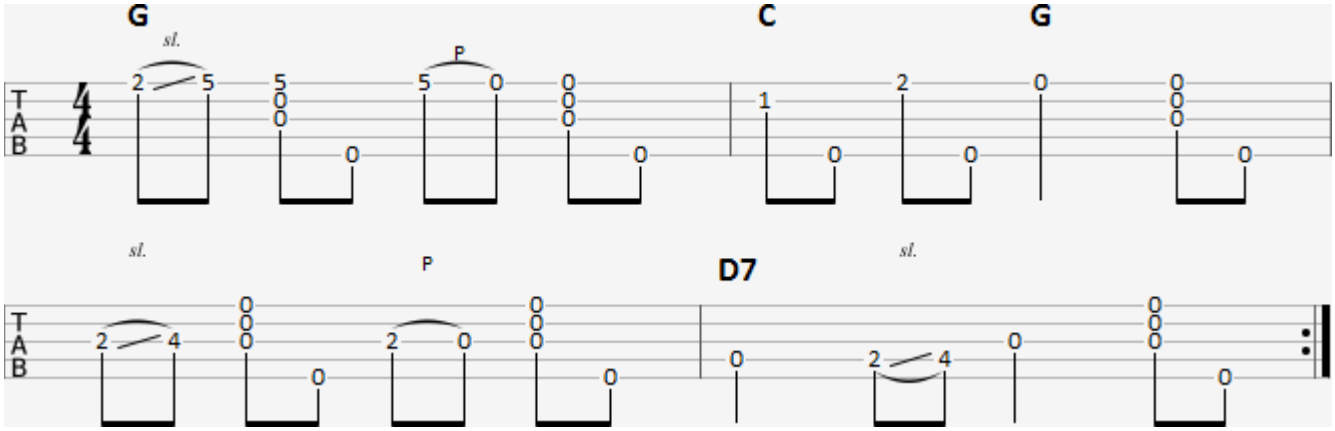


I intentionally overloaded this version with the various effects. Simplify things. Add double thumb and mix things up to create your own version of “Old Joe Clark”. Frailing banjo is highly improvisational in nature. It’s actually a good thing not playing a song the same way twice! Just make sure you are making musical sense.

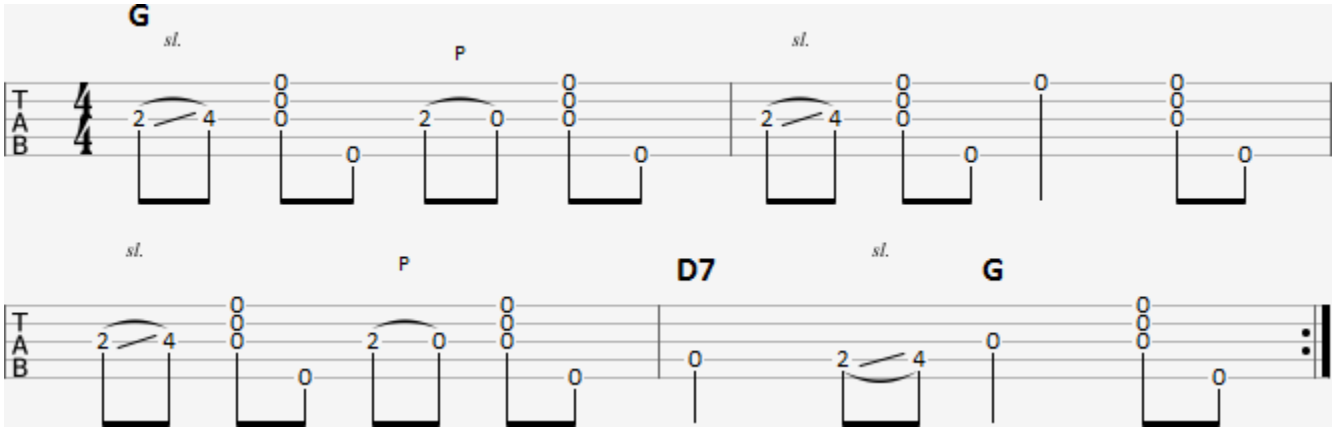
Now let’s try a new song that makes use of the hammer-on, pull-off and slide in a simpler fashion. “Cripple Creek” is in some ways the perfect banjo song. It is usually performed as an instrumental so that is how we are doing it here.

Cripple Creek – Verse

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Cripple Creek – Chorus



To See the Elephant

There are no limits. There are plateaus, but you must not stay there, you must go beyond them.
— Bruce Lee

The art of frailing banjo presents an interesting challenge. While the mechanics of our craft draw music from the five-string banjo in an extremely simple fashion, coordinating the picking hand and fretting hand to operate independently and in rhythm requires quite a bit of practice. The amount of practice varies from person to person. We each process information in unique ways. A technique or concept that comes easily to one may be daunting for another. That said, the playing field is much more level than most of us realize. After working with countless banjo students I have found that everybody has one or two things that come easily and one or two things that come only with great effort.

It is the things that require great effort that can make or break a banjo player. Every accomplished picker I have ever met has a similar story about picking up banjo techniques fast and easy until they run across something that stops them dead in their tracks. For some of us it is keeping a steady frailing rhythm while changing chords. For others it is getting a clear note from a hammer-on or pull-off. It is something different for each of us.

A lot of people quit when this happens. There are banjos gathering dust under beds and in closets all over the world. Put aside by people who, when things got hard, decided to pack up and quit.

The people who don't quit at this point go on to become banjo players. Not only that, they also end up with a deeper understanding of the craft and of themselves. It is a moment of understanding that cannot quite be put into words. In the 1800's there was an American phase that was used for this moment of understanding. They called it "Seeing the elephant". The phrase may have originated from an article published by The New York Times on March 1, 1861 entitled *Seeing The Elephant*:

> *It is narrated of a certain farmer that his life's desire was to behold this largest of quadrupeds, until the yearning became well-nigh a mania. He finally met one of the largest size traveling in the van of a menagerie. His horse was frightened, his wagon smashed, his eggs and poultry ruined. But he rose from the wreck radiant and in triumph. "A fig for the damage," quoth he, "for I have seen the elephant!"*

A soldier walking away from battle or a pioneer who survived the trip across the prairie might be heard to say that he or she had, "Seen the elephant." It was a way of saying that you had seen something - you understood something - that could not be put into words.

When you run into that one technique or concept that gives you trouble I hope you will keep working until you see the elephant.

You are smart enough to play the banjo. You do not lack anything. You do not need a special banjo with a wider, shorter, longer or narrower fretboard. Your hands are not too big. Your hands are not too small. You are not clumsy. You are not untalented. You can do this. I believe in you.

If chord changes give you trouble then slow down.

If striking the inside strings is difficult then practice methodically.

Do not rush yourself. This is not a race. There is no real end goal or higher level to attain. There is simply the craft – and the craft is wonderful enough that we do not need to attach rank or belt levels to it.

There is logic and beauty to be found both in music and in the art of frailing banjo. You just have to practice until you see the elephant.

A Frailing Songbook

In this chapter I have collected some songs and fiddle tunes that work well as teaching exercises.

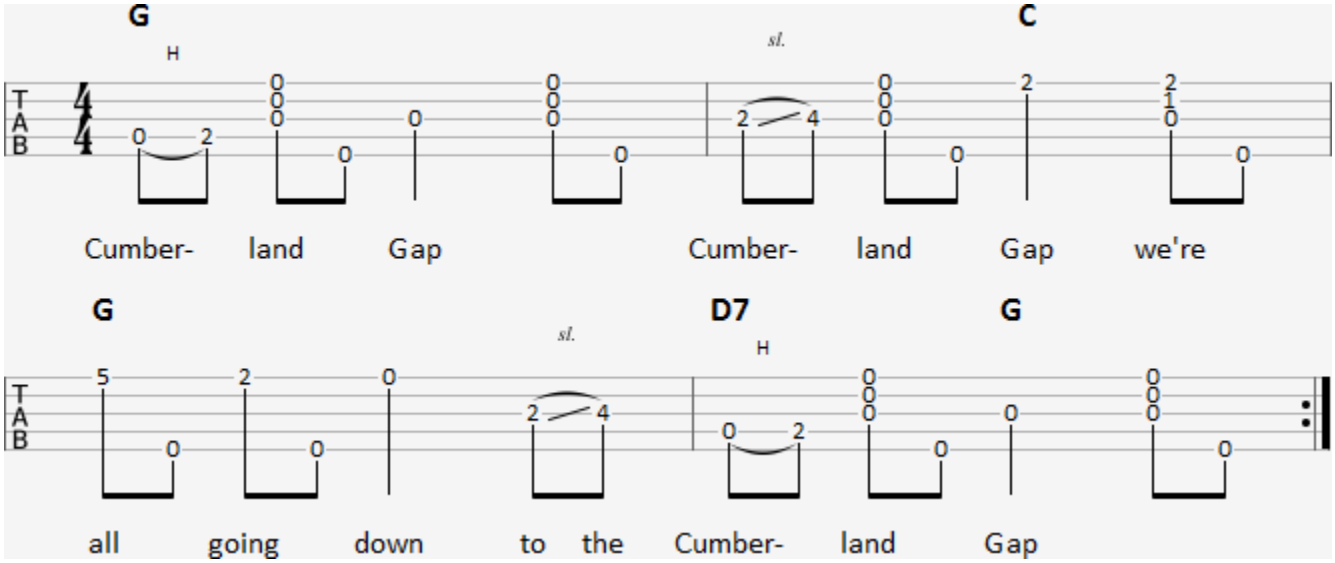
As you advance both in your playing skill and your understanding of music there will be no need to learn songs. Advanced frailing banjo is completely improvisational in nature. We will explore improvisation in upcoming volumes of this series. For right now just play these songs and enjoy discovering how different chords and techniques can be put together to make interesting and pleasing sounds. These are songs I learned from my father. These are songs I would play for my Aunt Dora under the dogwood tree on warm afternoons. They are fun, simple and beautiful. Play these songs and sing along with your banjo. Enjoy!

Cumberland Gap

According to Wikipedia the Cumberland Gap is a narrow pass through the long ridge of the Cumberland Mountains, within the Appalachian Mountains, near the junction of the U.S. states of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. Here is a song that celebrates this American landmark. It is very simple and a lot of fun to play.

Cumberland Gap

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Me and my wife and my wife's pap
we're all going down to Cumberland Gap

Cumberland Gap, Cumberland Gap
we're all going down to Cumberland Gap

Cumberland Gap with its cliffs and rocks
home of the panther, bear and fox

Cumberland Gap is a mighty fine place
three kinds of water to wash your face

Lay down boys and take a little nap
we're all going down to Cumberland Gap

Fourteen miles to Cumberland Gap
we're all going down to Cumberland Gap

Ragtime Annie

"Ragtime Annie" is a fiddle tune. A fiddle tune is an instrumental piece that is usually played on the fiddle, but works just fine on other instruments.

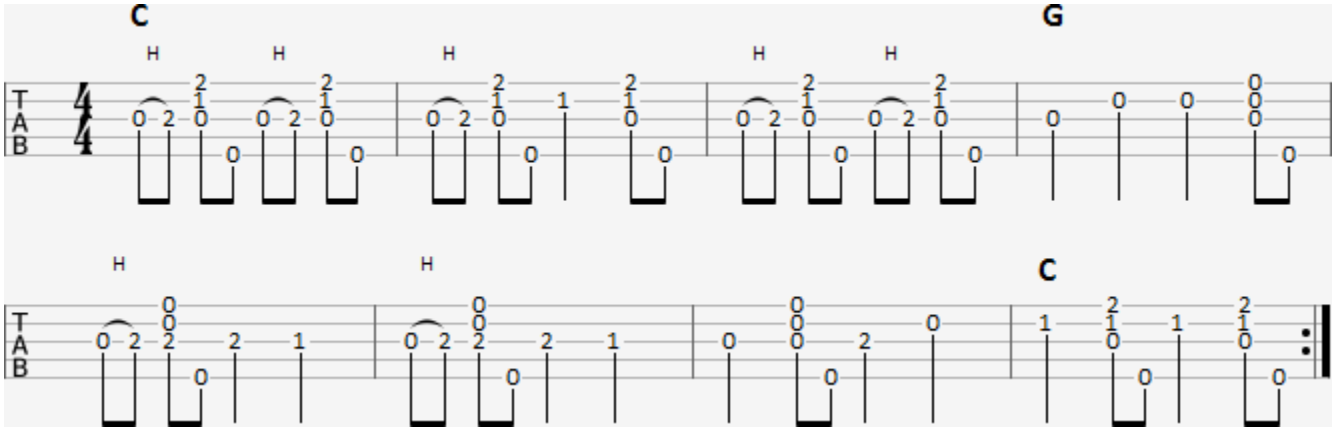
This song has an A and a B part. Each part of the song is usually played twice before switching to the other.

The fun thing about this song is its simplicity. Once you get that third string hammer-on in the A part rolling smooth while holding the C chord people will be sure that you are doing something complex. I have had people tell me it sounds like two banjos playing!

In the B part you will notice a G7 chord played for a single beat in the first measure and an A chord in the fourth measure. The A chord is easy. Just barre across the second string. You can do it!

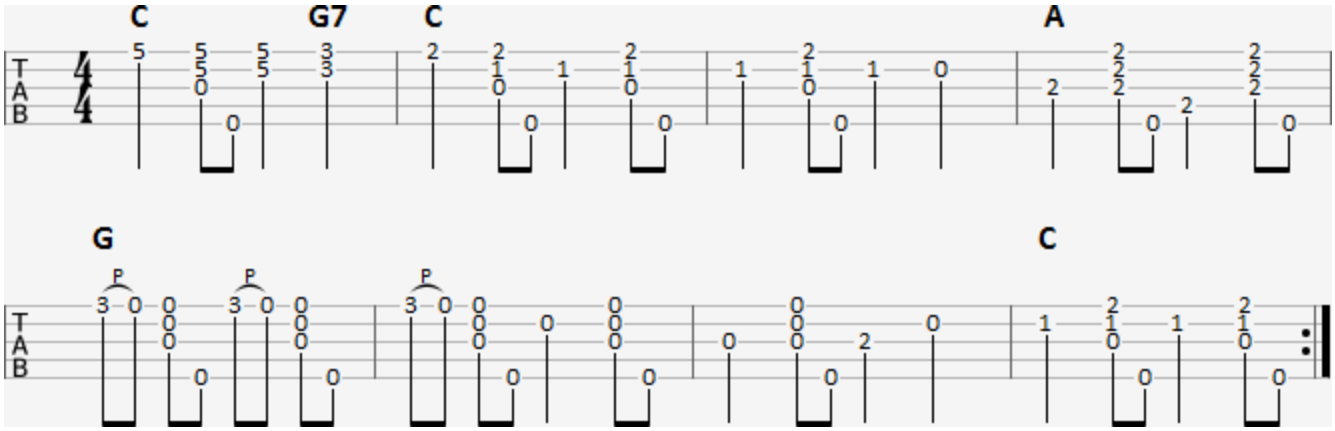
Ragtime Annie – A Part

4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning



Ragtime Annie – B Part

4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning

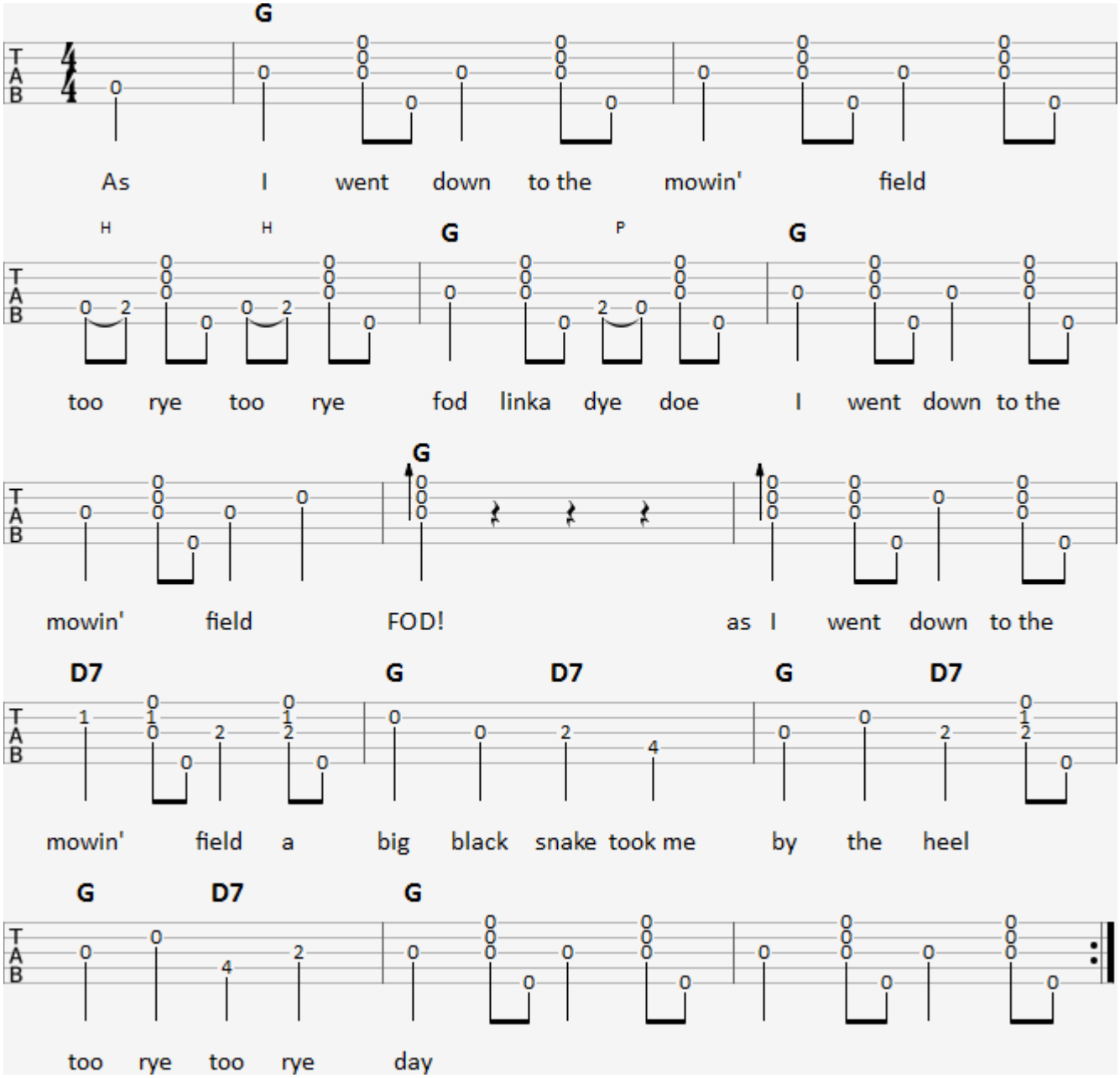


Fod!

A goofy nonsense song. Nobody is sure where this one comes from. It first showed up on a field recording by the Library of Congress of migrant workers singing in the early 1940's. Notice the brush chords that pop up in place of single notes, and also pay attention to the rests. Be sure to shout "Fod!" real loud to make the rests more dramatic and silly.

Fod!

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



I fell down upon the ground
I Shut both eyes and looked all around.

I set upon a stump to take my rest
when up jumped a woodchuck from his nest.

The woodchuck grinned a banjo song
when up stepped a skunk with his britches on.

The woodchuck and skunk got into a fight
the fumes was so strong that they put out the light.

They danced and they played till the tune began to rust
It's hard to tell which smelled the worst.

There's a little piece of cornbread sitting on the shelf
if you want any more you'll have to sing it yourself!

Coal Creek March

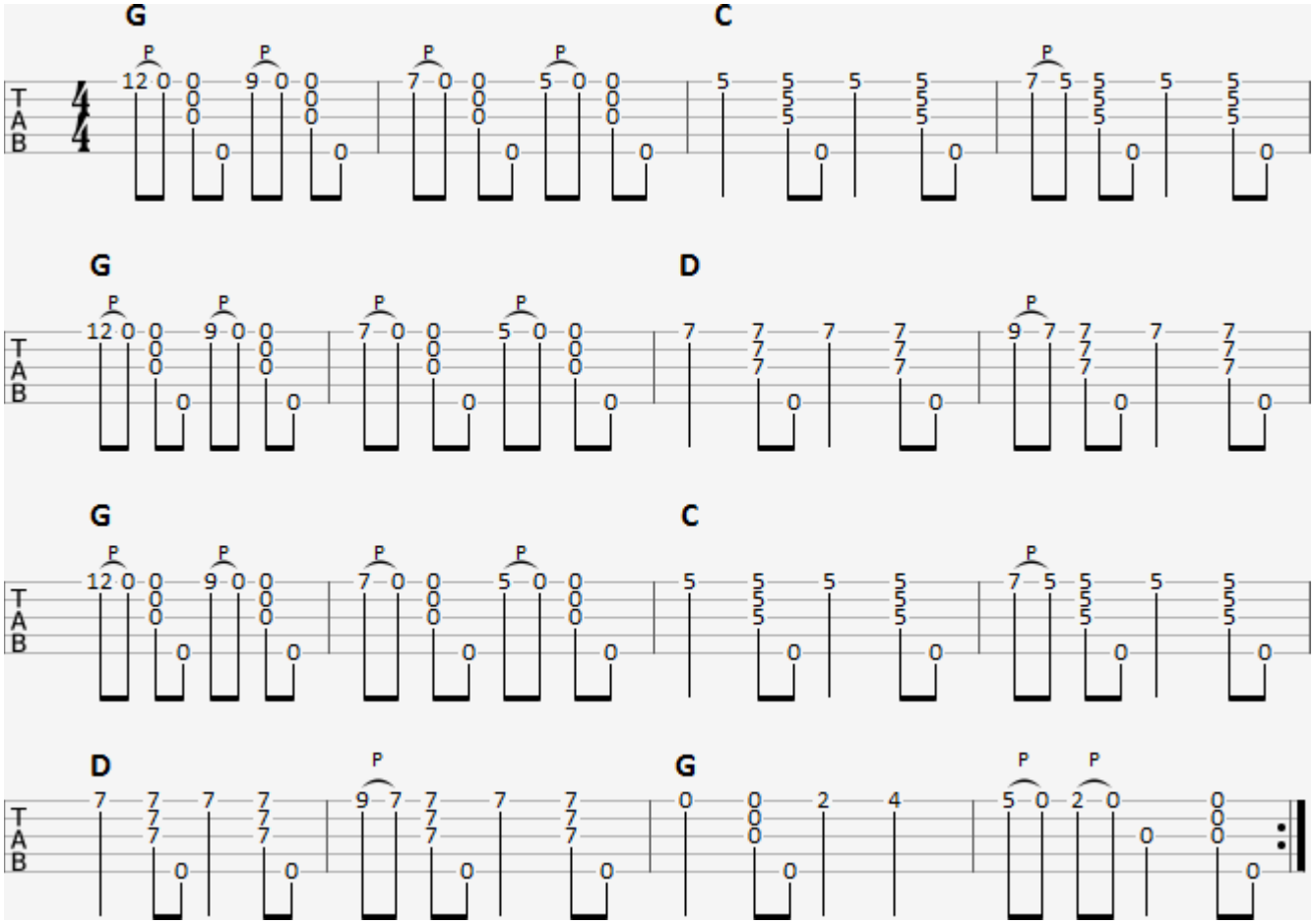
A very simple tune that always impresses an audience because it looks and sounds much more complicated than it is.

This is one of many banjo tunes associated with the armed labor uprising in Tennessee that ran from around 1891 to 1893 known as the Coal Creek War.

I was taught to treat this song as a performance piece. Start out by playing through the song very slowly and increase the tempo with each repetition until you are going as fast as you can. The idea is to create an image of the striking miners walking slowly up towards the state militia until . . . well, you get the idea. Be sure to look up the story in the history books. There are a lot of great songs about the Coal Creek War.

Coal Creek March

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



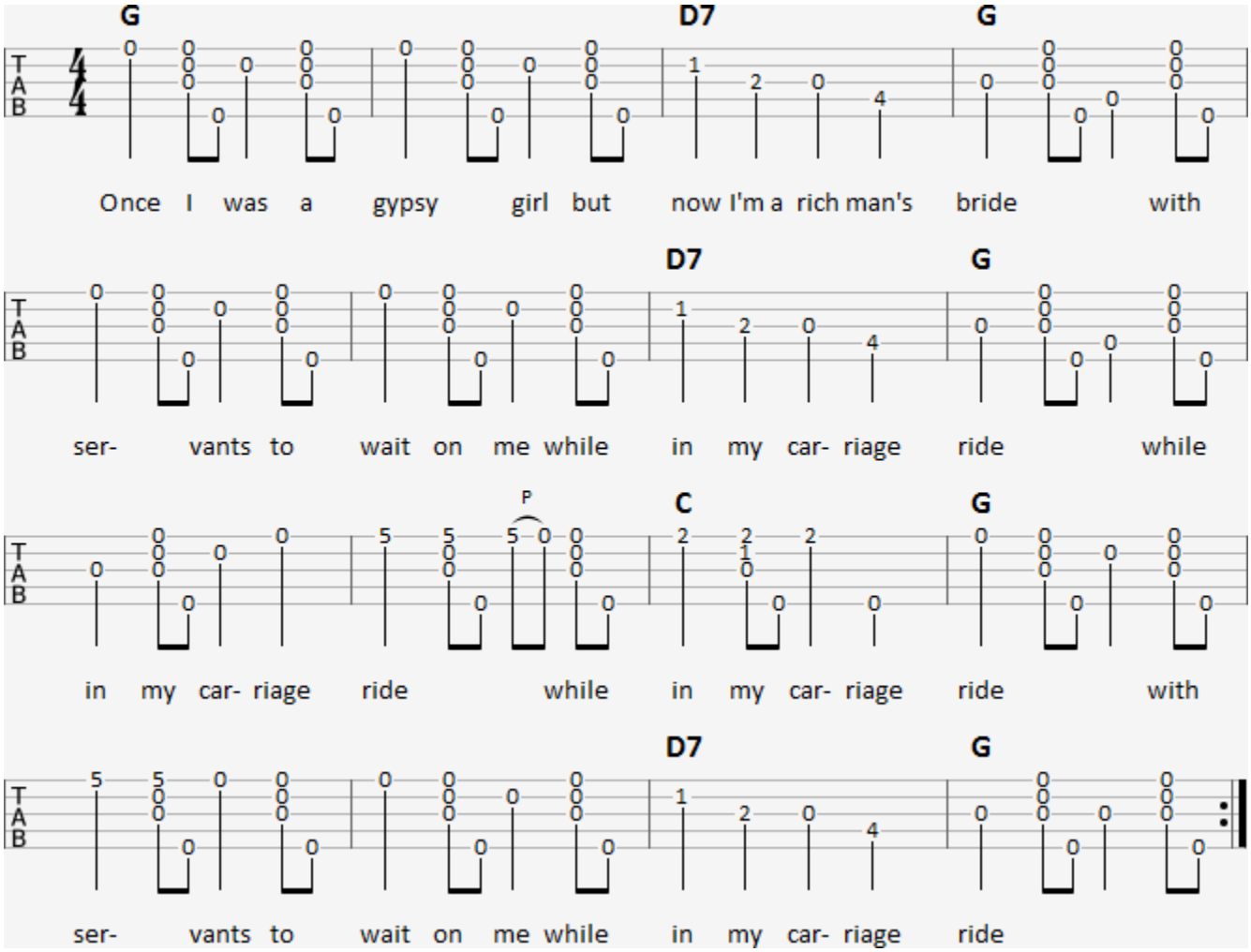
Gypsy Girl

I learned this song from my father. It is an old English dance hall number. The lyrics are fun, but the melody also makes a great instrumental. Be sure to practice holding a D7 chord and fretting the fourth string at the fourth fret with your pinky a few times before jumping into the song. That stretch can catch you by surprise.

Also take note of the structure of the lyrics. In some lyrics the high part where we fret the first string at the fifth fret is played through twice. You should be able to pick up on that quickly as you play through the song.

Gypsy Girl

4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Once I was a gypsy girl, but now I'm a rich man's bride
With servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride
While in my carriage ride, while in my carriage ride
With servants to wait on me while in my carriage ride

When I was strolling one day down a London street
A handsome young squire was the first I chanced to meet
He viewed my pretty brown cheeks, which now he loves so well
He says, "You, my gypsy gal, will you my fortune tell?
Will you my fortune tell, will you my fortune tell
He says, "my little gypsy girl, will you my fortune tell?"

"Yes sir, kind sir, please hold to me your hand.
You have many fine mansions in many foreign land.
But all those fine young ladies, you've cast them all aside
I am the gypsy girl who is to be your bride.
Who is to be your bride, who is to be your bride
I am the gypsy girl who is to be your bride."

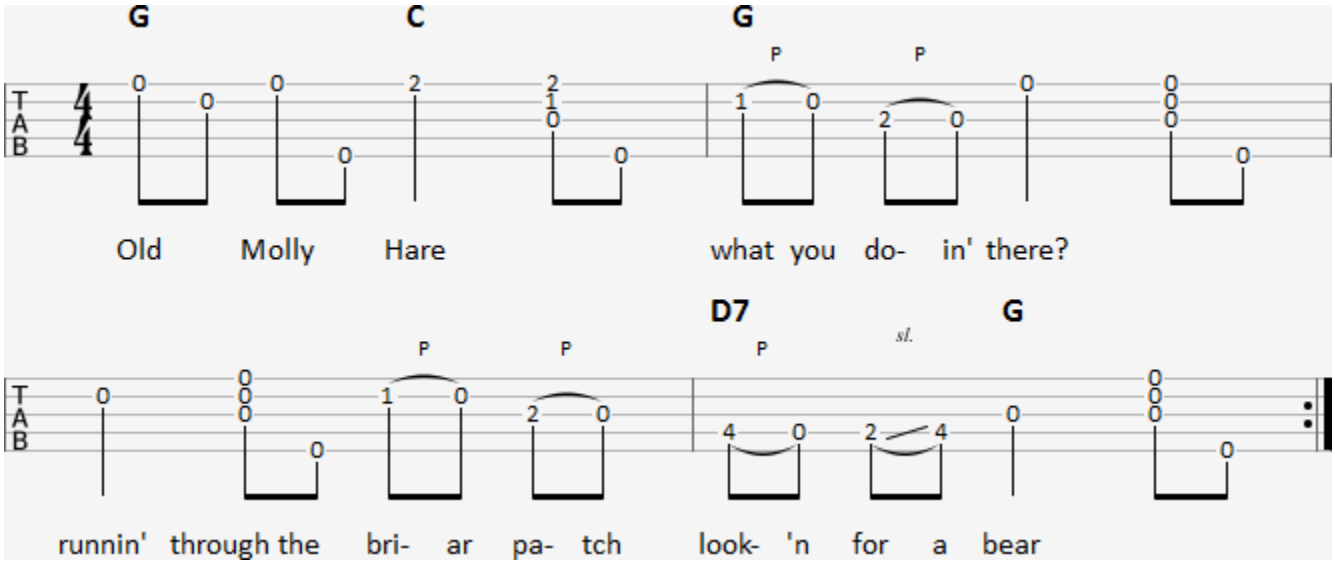
He took me, he led me, to a pleasant quiet shore
with servants to wait on me and open my own door.
And open my own door, and open my own door
with servants to wait on me and open my own door.

Old Molly Hare

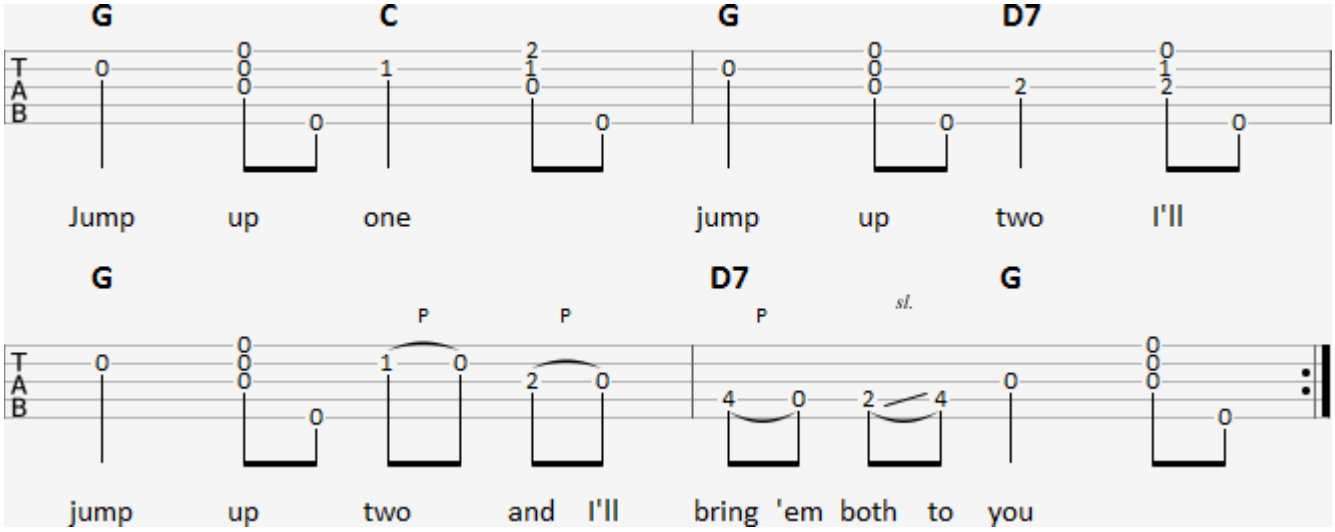
A fun little nonsense song that is wonderful for jam sessions and dances. Like many other dance songs, this is a two part song with a verse and a chorus. In some sessions you will hear it called the A part and the B part.

The song kicks off with a drop-thumb. If this gives you trouble you can replace the drop-thumb with a strike strum thumb pattern. This song is usually played at a quick and lively tempo.

Old Molly Hare - Verse
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Old Molly Hare - Chorus
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Old Molly Hare what you doin' there?
Sitting by the fireplace in a rocking chair.

Jump back, jump back, daddy shot a bear
shot him in the eye and he never touched a hair.

Old Molly Hard what you doin' there?
Runnin' through the briar patch fast as I can tear.

Old Molly Hare what you doin' there?
Sitting by the butter dish pickin' out a hair.

Rather be here than way over there
a whole mess of briars all tangled in my hair.

Old Molly Hare what you doin' there?
Sitting by the fireplace smoking a cigar

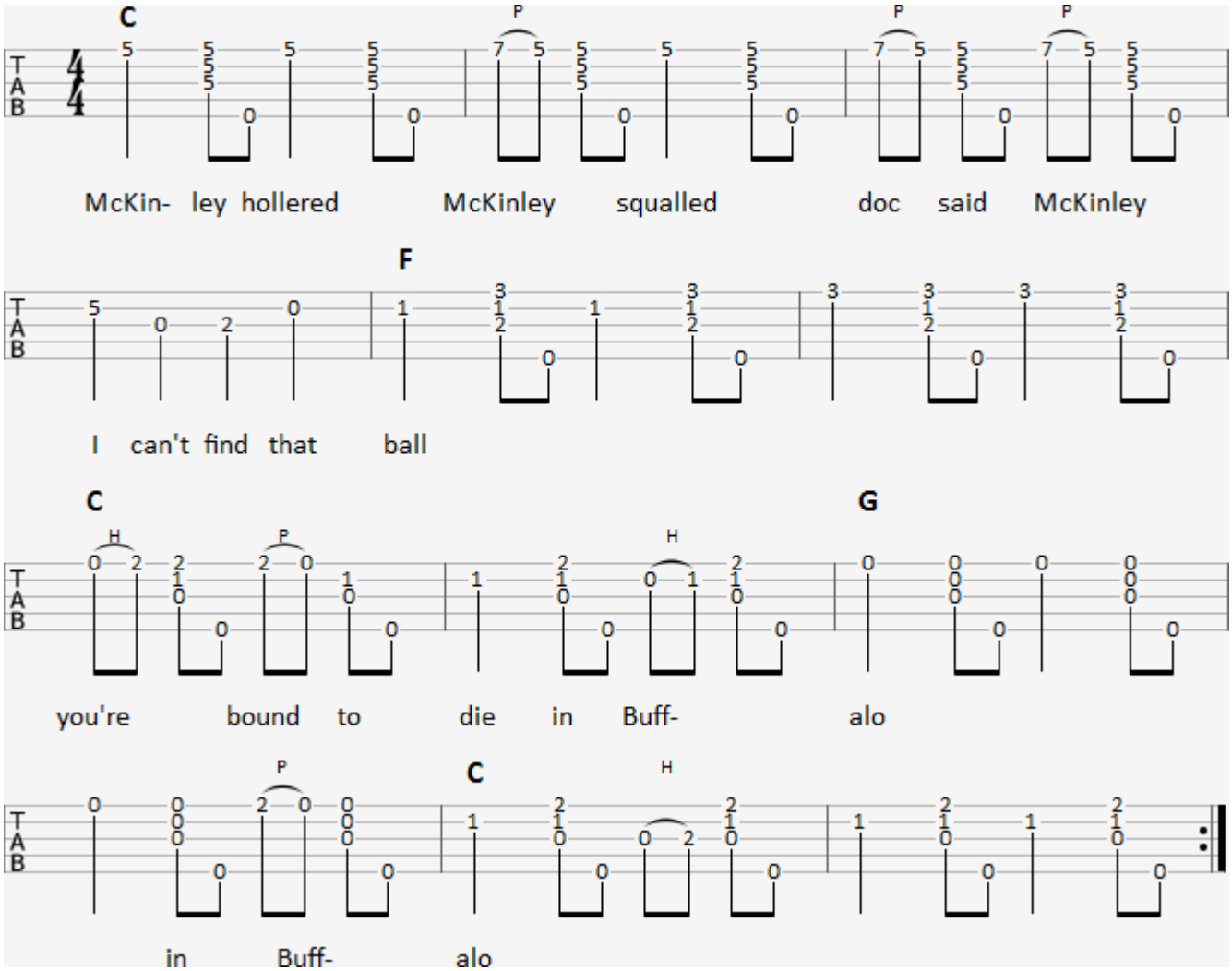
The White House Blues

In spite of its morbid subject matter, this is one of my favorite banjo tunes. The song tells the story of President William McKinley being shot and fatally wounded by Leon Czolgosz on September 6, 1901.

The melody had already been used to tell another story of the McKinley administration, the sinking of the Battleship Maine. Years later the melody would be used again by Blind Willie McTell for his beautiful blues ballad “Deilia”.

“The White House Blues” is a fun challenge. The song starts with the C barre chord and jumps up to a full F chord. It will take some practice, but once you get it smooth it can be a showstopper!

The White House Blues
4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning



McKinley hollered, McKinley squalled
Doc said to McKinley, "I can't find that ball"
You're bound to die in Buffalo, in Buffalo

Roosevelt in the White House, he's doing his best
McKinley in the graveyard, he's taking his rest
He's gonna be gone a long, long time

Hush up, little children, now don't you fret
You'll draw a pension at your papa's death
He's gonna be gone a long, long time

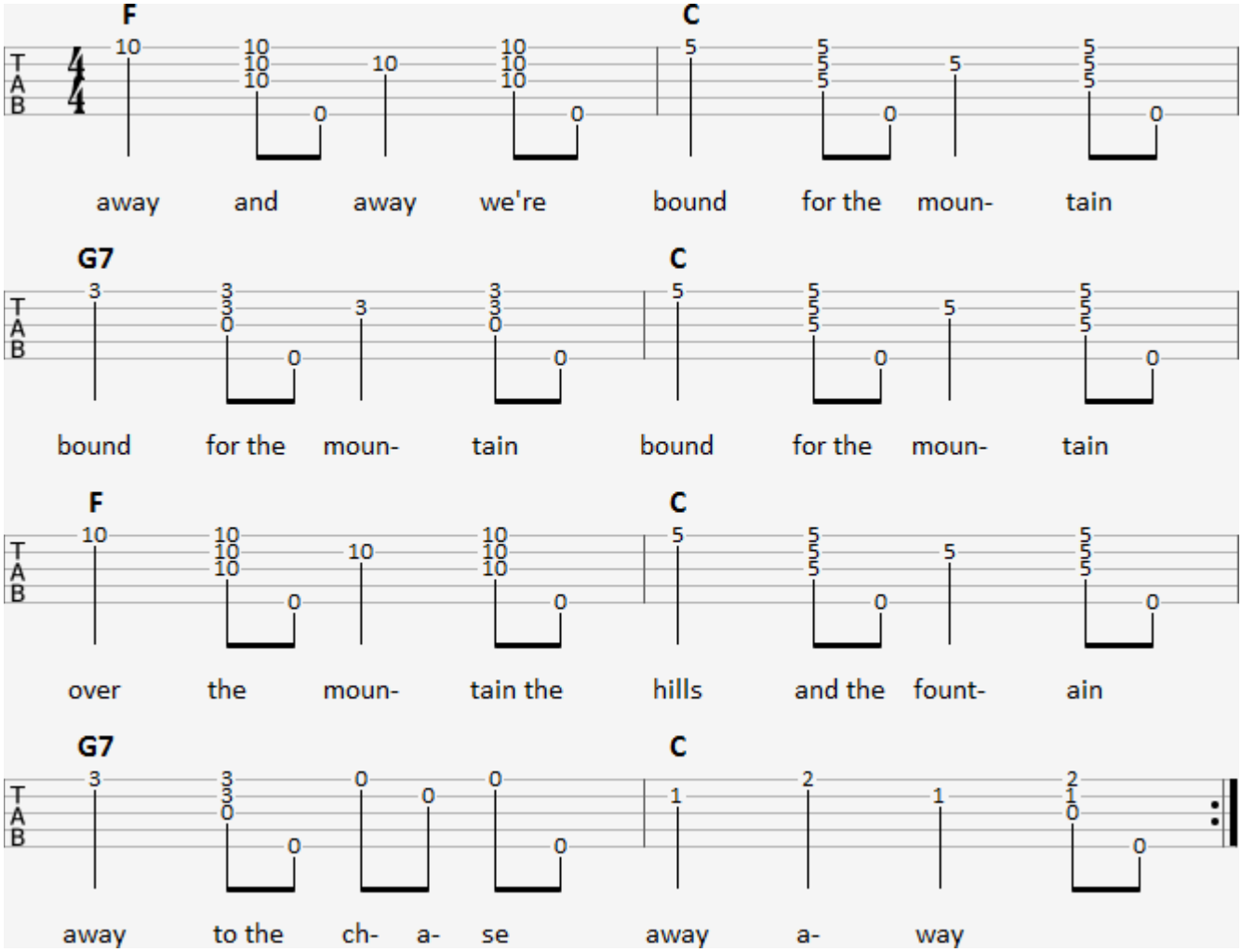
Roosevelt in the White House drinking out of a silver cup
McKinley in the graveyard, he'll never wake up
He's gonna be gone a long, long time

Cumberland Mountain Deer Chase

Uncle Dave Macon made this banjo tune famous. Like “Coal Creek March” the usual presentation is to start the song slowly and gradually speed up with each repetition of the tune to create the feeling of running with your faithful hunting dogs chasing a deer through the mountains.

The secret to the effectiveness of this tune is its simplicity. Most of the song is played with partial barre chords covering two or three strings.

Cumberland Mountain Deer Chase - Verse
4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning

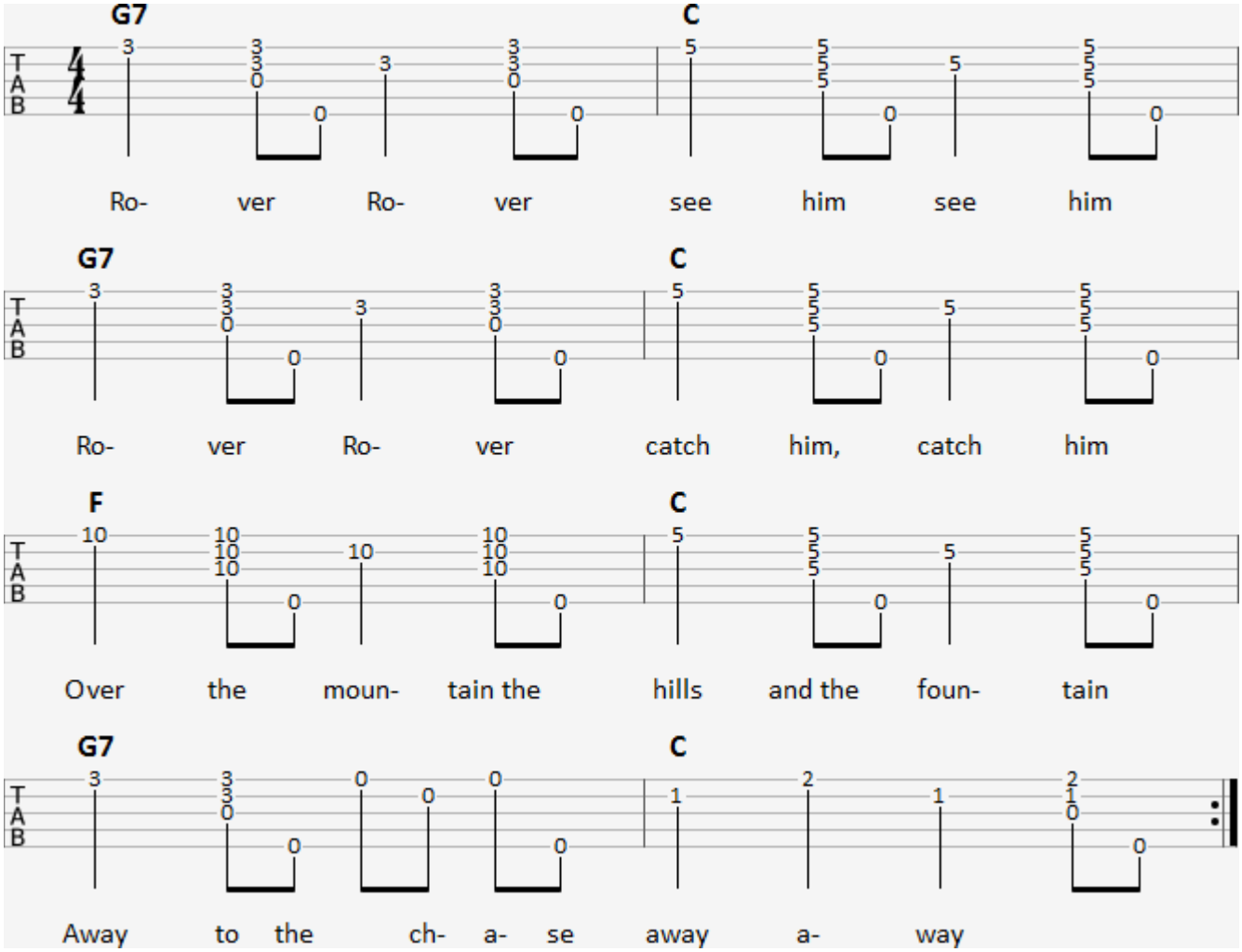


Away, away we’re bound for the mountain
Bound for the mountain, bound for the mountain
Over the mountain, the hills and the fountain
Away to the chase away, away

Now we’re getting right for the race
The hounds and the horses all in the pace
Over the mountain, the hills and the fountain
Away to the chase away, away

Note:
Some performers will yell or do a quick spoken word bit describing the chase before going into the chorus. Uncle Dave would holler something like, "Now we're set just right for the race, the old hound dogs are ready for the chase!" and then jump back into the chorus. Use your imagination and come up with ways to use your voice and the banjo to draw people into the excitement of the story. Play faster when describing the panting of the deer and slower when singing about the steady pace of the dogs. Paint a musical picture. This sort of musical entertainment was a common thing for banjo players in minstrel shows and medicine wagons.

Cumberland Mountain Deer Chase - Chorus
4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning



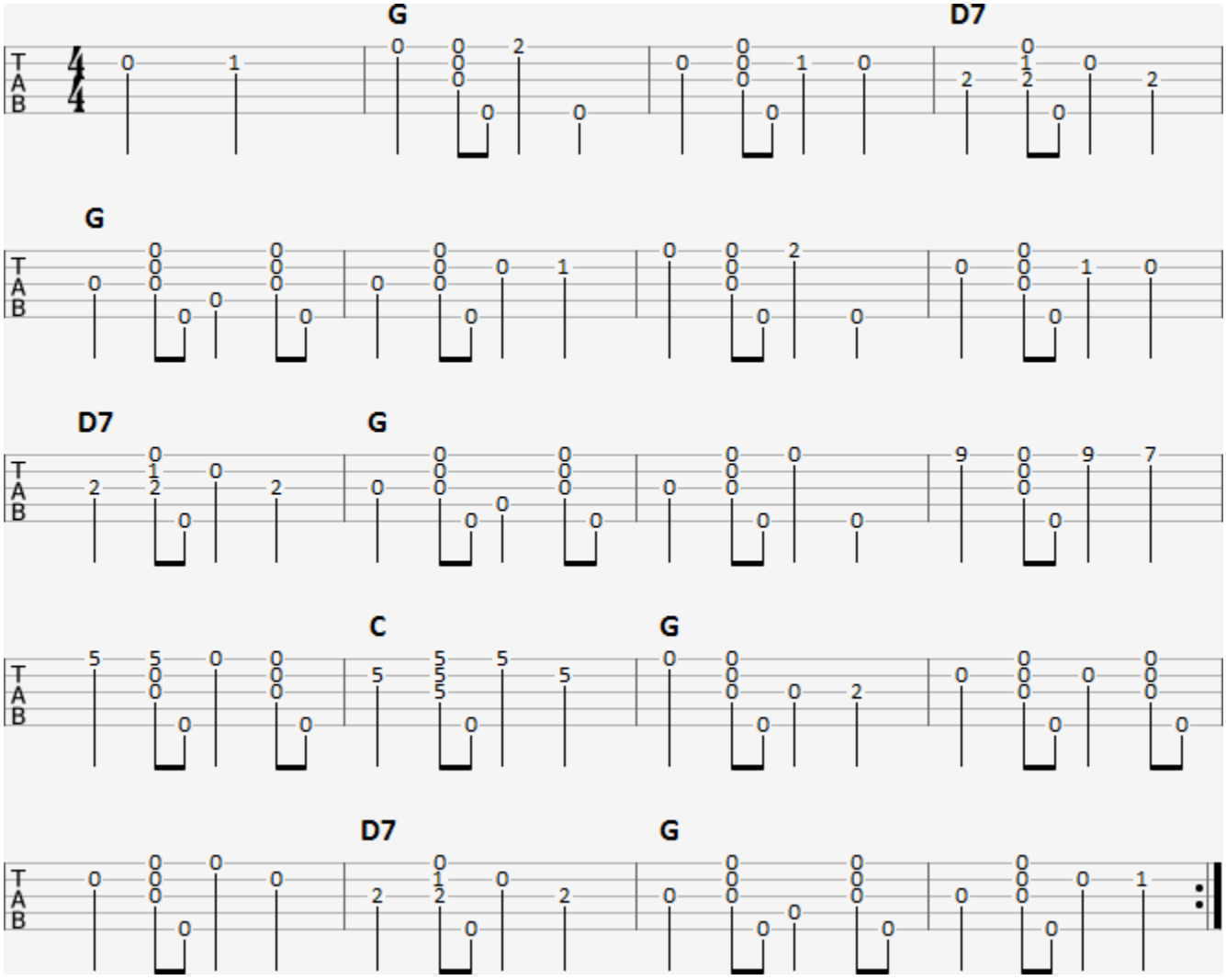
Rover, Rover, see him, see him
Rover, Rover, catch him, catch him
Over the mountain, the hills and the fountain
Away to the chase away, away

Wildwood Flower

"Wildwood Flower" has lyrics, but they are almost incomprehensible so most pickers nowadays treat it as an instrumental number. The song was an old parlor tune that had been all but forgotten when Maybelle Carter's guitar solo caught the attention of country music fans all over the world.

My arrangement of the tune uses the fifth string as a melody note in several measures. The timing may be tricky the first time you try it, so take it slow. A moderate tempo will really draw out the melody over the frailing rhythm.

Wildwood Flower
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning

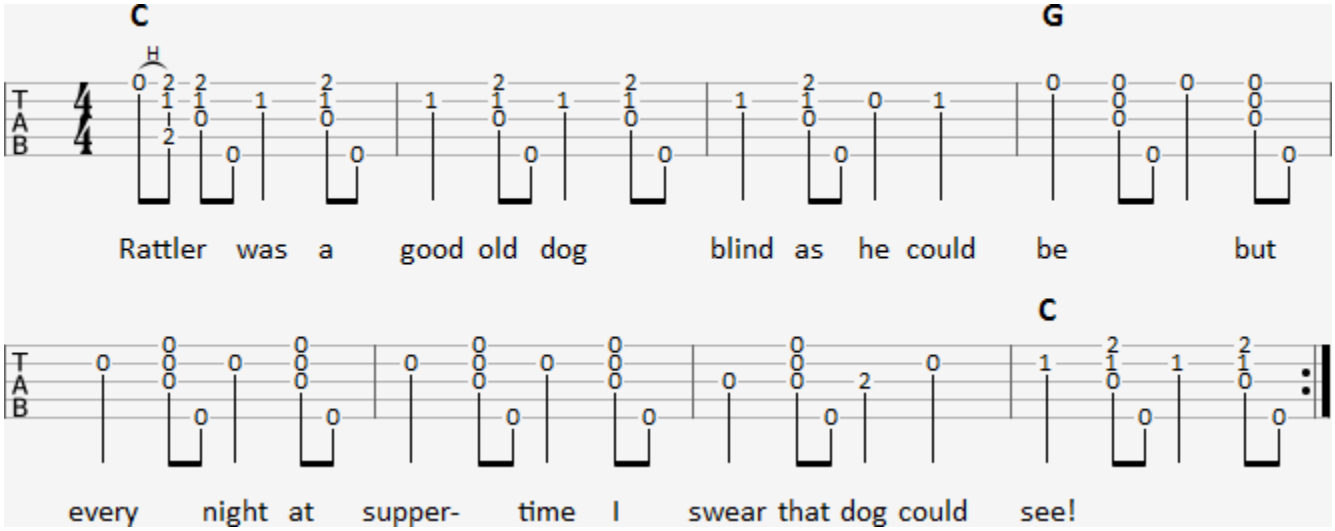


Old Rattler

Grandpa Jones used to bring down the house at the Grand Ole Opry with his frailing banjo on songs like “Old Rattler”.

I intentionally arranged this one to be nice and simple. The only part that may be difficult is the C chord hammer-on in the first measure. Just strike the first string and then instead of fingering the C chord slam your fingers on the first string second fret, second string first fret and fourth string second fret. The full chord hammer-on gives the opening measure a little bit of decoration.

Old Rattler
4/4 time / Key of C / G tuning



Rattler was a good old dog
blind as he could be
but every night at supper time
I swear that dog could see.

Chorus:

Here! Rattler, Here! Here!
Here! Rattler! Here!
Call old Rattler from the barn
Here! Rattler! Here!

Old Rattler barked the other night
I thought he'd treed a coon
I came out and I found out
He was barking at the moon.

Well, grandma had a yellow hen
broody as could be
we set her on three buzzard eggs
and out hatched one old crow

Grandpa had a muley cow
She was muley when she's born
It took a jaybird forty years
to fly from horn to horn

If I had a needle and thread
As fine as I could sew
I'd sew my sweetheart to my back
And down the road we’d go

Old Rattler was a smart old dog
Even though he was blind
He wouldn't hurt one single thing
he was so very kind

Now old Rattler's dead and gone
Like all good dogs do
You better not act a dog yourself
Or you'll be going there too!

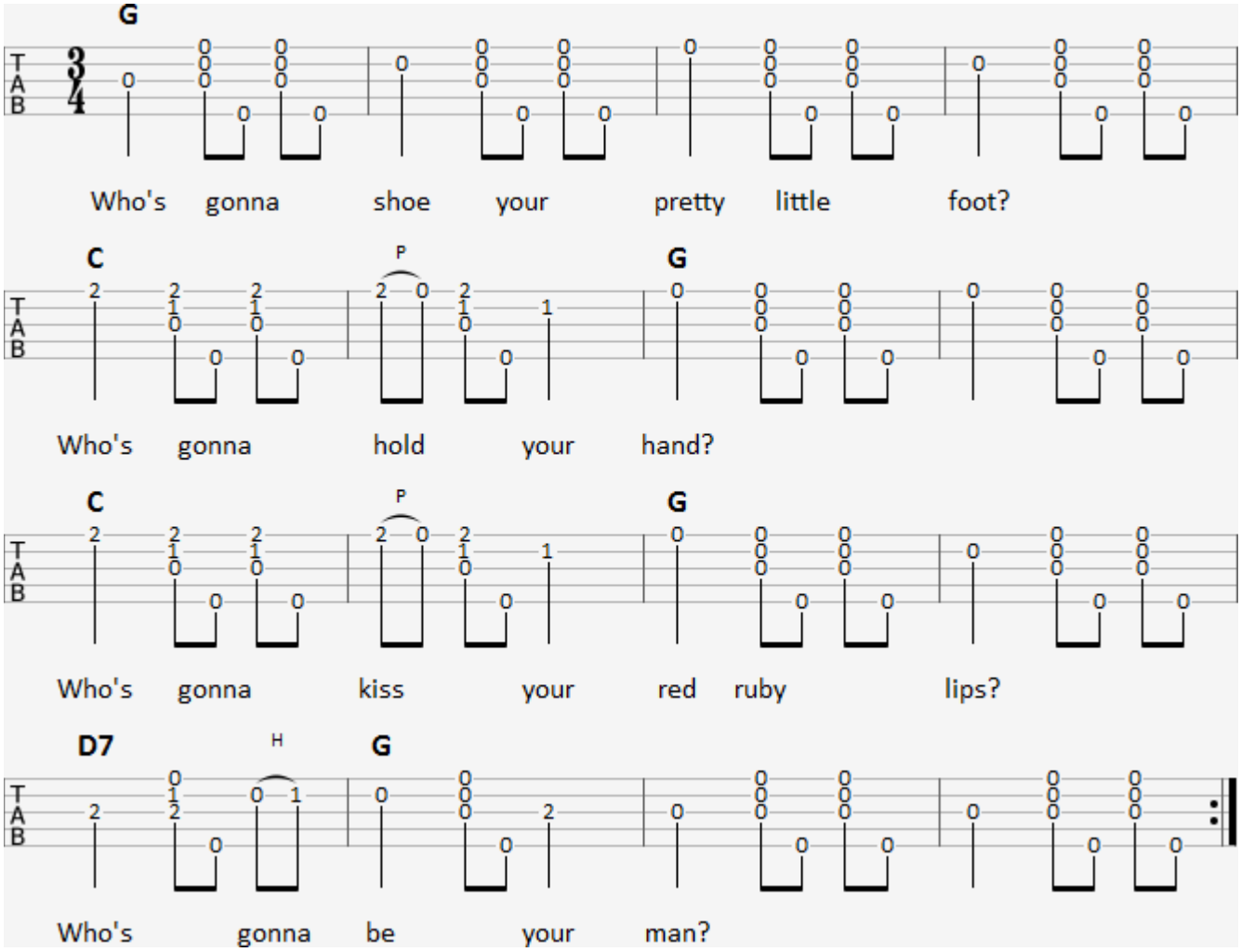
Who’s Gonna Shoe Your Pretty Little Foot?

A love song in 3/4 time.

This is a simple but powerful little song. I have many happy memories of listening to my dad playing the banjo and singing this to my mom.

The only tricky spot is the first string pull-off while holding the C chord. You have to keep the lilting three beats to a measure rhythm whole playing strike, strum-thumb strike for a count of “One and two and three” and then return to the “One two and three and” rhythm. It’s not hard you can do it.

Who’s Gonna Shore Your Pretty Little Foot?
3/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Who's gonna shoe your pretty little feet?
Who's gonna glove your hand?
Who's gonna kiss your red ruby lips?
Who's gonna be your man?

Papa's gonna shoe my pretty little feet,
Mama's gonna glove my hand,
Sister's gonna kiss my red ruby lips,
I don't need no man.

I don't need no man, poor boy
I don't need no man,
Sister's gonna kiss my red ruby lips,
I don't need no man.

Who's gonna shoe your pretty little feet?
Who's gonna glove your hand?
Who's gonna kiss your red ruby lips?
Who's gonna be your man?

In The Pines

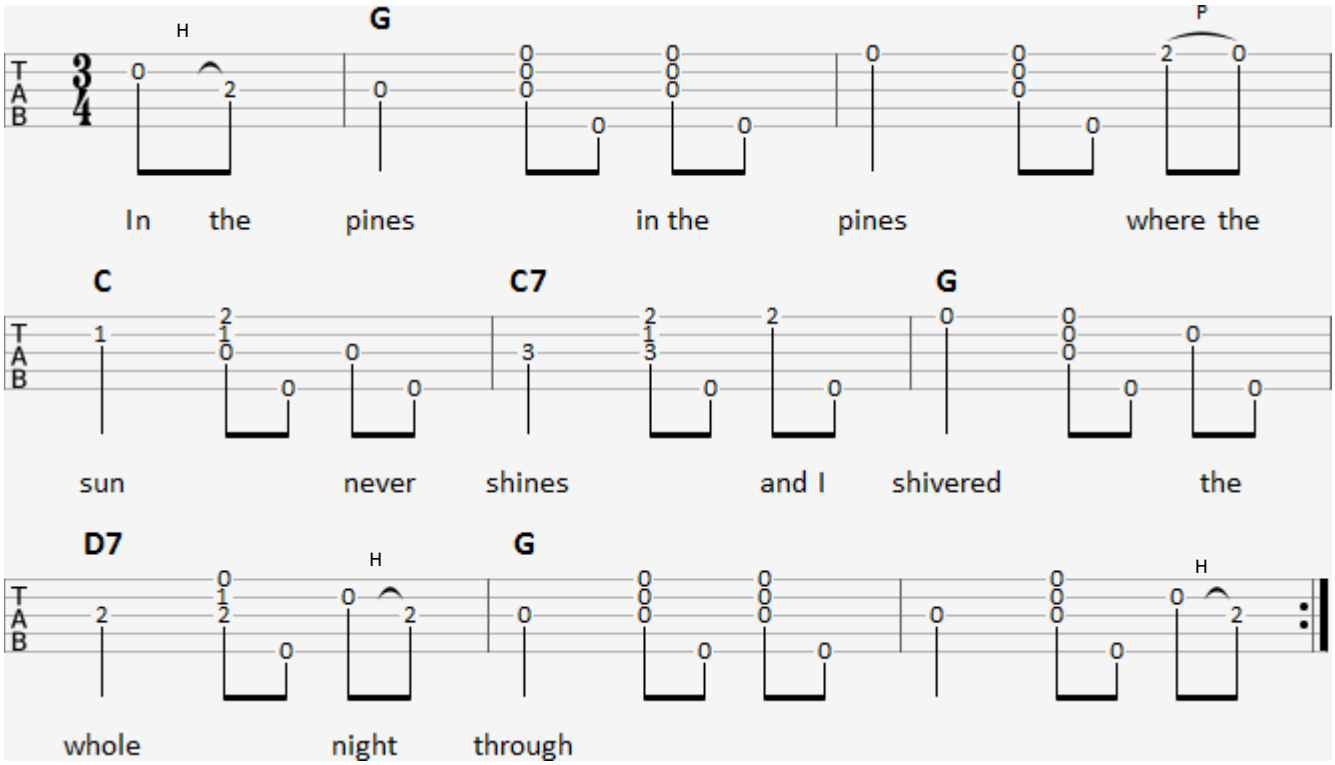
Huddie Ledbetter's (also known as Lead Belly) recording of this song backed by his famous twelve string guitar has haunted folk musicians for decades. Nirvana's Kurt Cobain was so moved by the song he briefly fronted a Lead Belly tribute band. The Four Pennies had a hit in the UK charts with "In The Pines" in 1964. Bill Monroe did an awesome cover and there are some great versions in the Cajun traditions.

The tone of this song is dark and a bit mysterious. Take note of the pickup note at the beginning of the song. We are striking the second string and playing the hammer-on at the third string second fret.

Also take note of the C7 chord where we finger a C chord and fret the third string at the third fret with our little finger.

You will find this melody used many times in various folk songs. The original recording of "The House of the Rising Sun" used this melody. Give it a try.

In The Pines
3/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Little girl, little girl, don't lie to me
Tell me where did you sleep last night

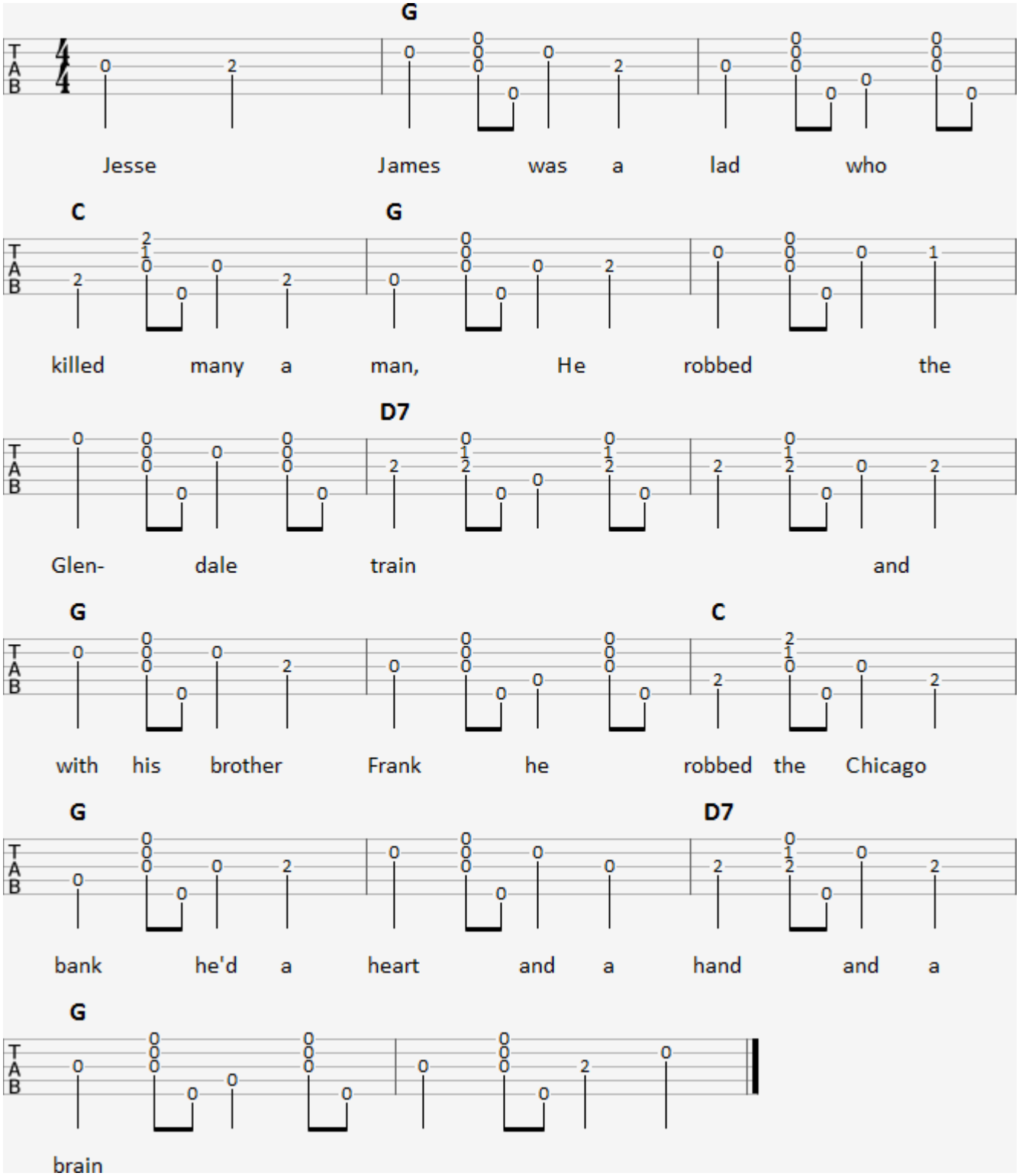
In the pines, in the pines
Where the sun never shines
and I shivered the whole night through

My girl, my girl, where will you go
Tell me where did you sleep last night

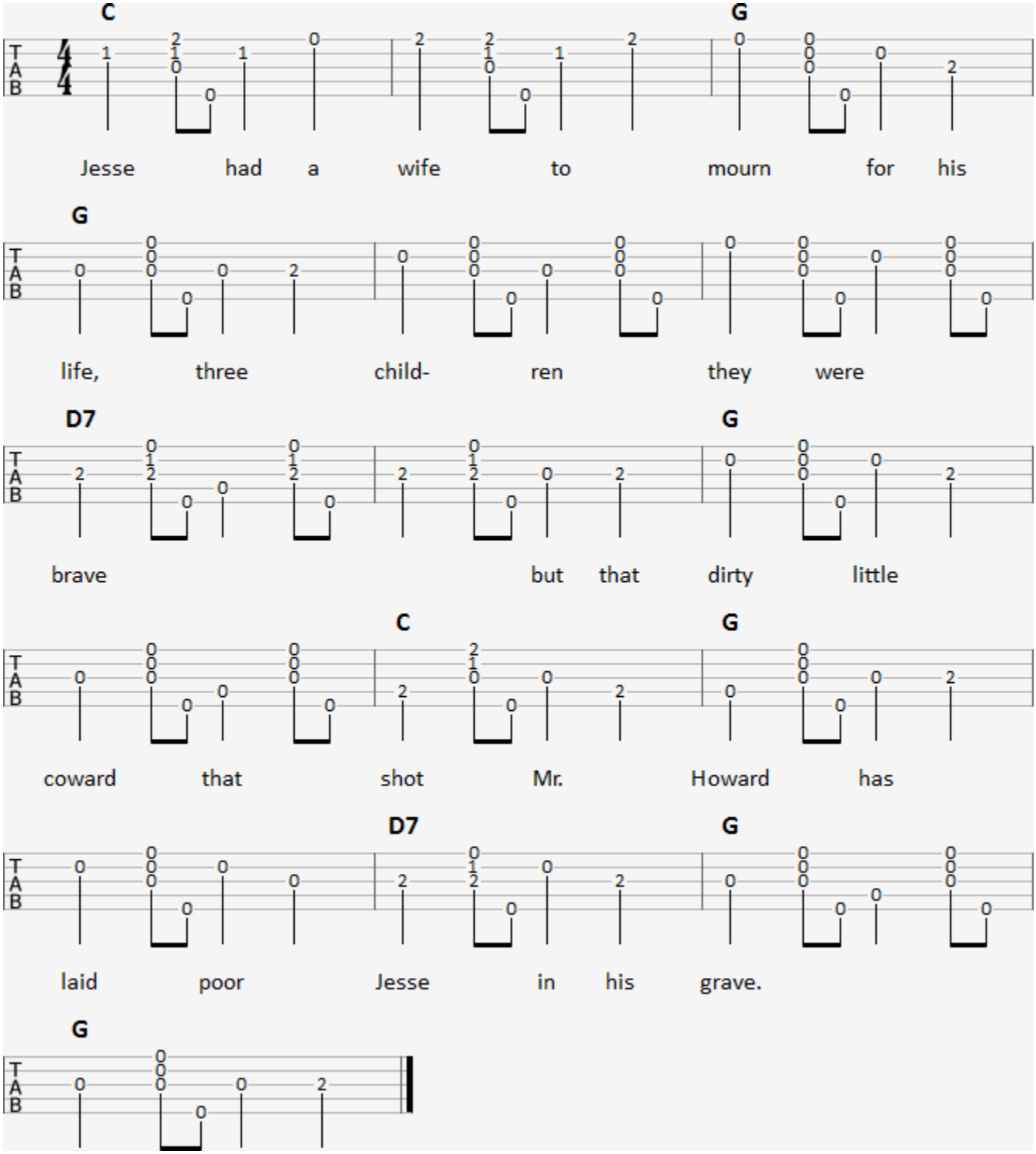
Jesse James

Confederate insurgencies broke out after the Civil War. One insurgent group based in Missouri wound up becoming the fabled James-Younger Gang. The notorious outlaws have become legendary throughout the history of the West. This song is about the gang's most famous member.

Jesse James - Verse
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Jesse James - Chorus
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Jesse James was a lad that killed many a man
He robbed the Glendale train and with
his brother frank he robbed the Chicago bank
He'd a heart and a hand and a brain.

Chorus:
Well Jesse had a wife to mourn for his life
Three children, they were brave
but that dirty little coward that shot Mr. Howard
has laid poor Jesse in his grave

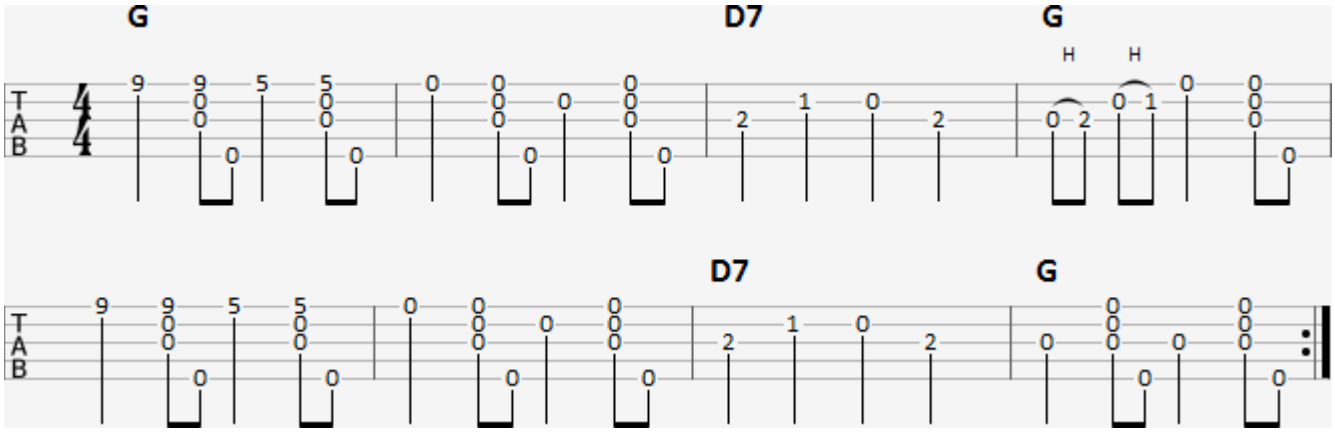
Flop Eared Mule

"Flop Eared Mule" is a great fiddle tune that serves well as an introduction to key changes. The A part of the song is in the key of G and the B part of the song in the key of D.

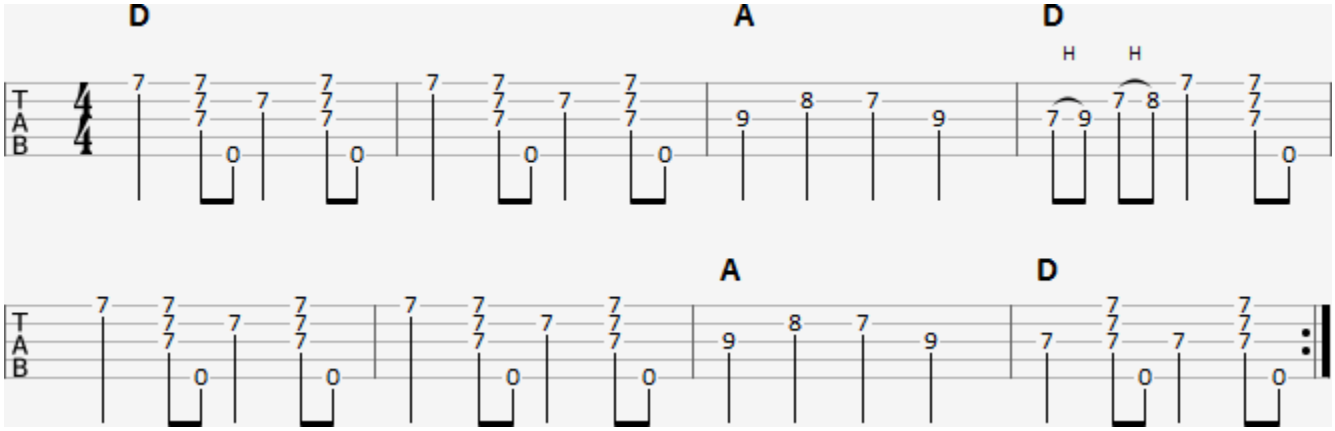
That means we use the G and D chords for the A part and in the B part we play the D and A chords. Pay close attention to how the two parts of the song sound. Different keys result in different chord progressions – and that gives each part of the song a unique feel.

The B part is played out of a D barre chord. The hammer-on's are a great workout.

Flop Eared Mule – A Part
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



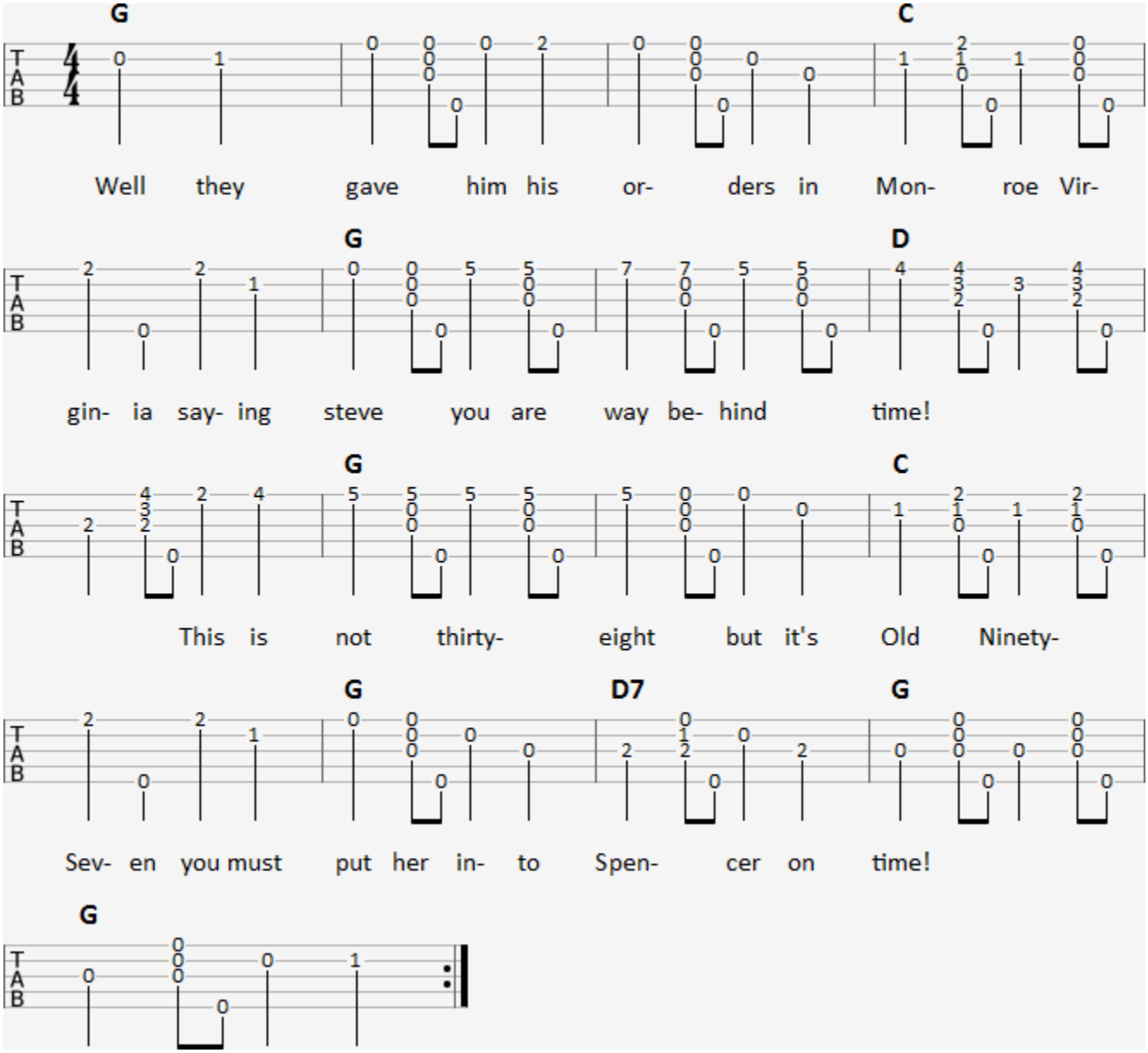
Flop Eared Mule – B Part
4/4 time / Key of D / G tuning



Wreck of the Old 97

Dear Old Dad once met a gentleman from Virginia who saw the famous train wreck this song describes. What a great song! Have fun with the D chord.

Wreck of the Old 97
4/4 time / Key of G / G tuning



Well they gave him his orders in Monroe Virginia
Saying, “Steve you're way behind time!
This is not 38, this is ole' 97
you must put her into Spencer on time!”

So he turned around and said to his black and greasy fireman
just shovel on a little more the coal
And when we cross that White Oak Mountain
You can watch ole' 97 roll

It's a mighty rough road from Lynchburg to Danville
It's a line on a three-mile grade
It was on that grade that he lost his airbrakes
You can see what a jump he made

He was going down that grade makin' 90 miles an hour
When his whistle broke into a scream
He was found in the wreck with his hand on the throttle
Scalded to death by the steam

Moving on to Volume Two

Without continual growth and progress, such words as improvement, achievement, and success have no meaning.
- Benjamin Franklin

We have covered a great deal of material in this volume. Before we pack up and move on to volume two. I think it would be beneficial to take a moment to review what we have learned.

There are three elements to the craft of frailing banjo.

- The picking hand
- The fretting hand
- The player

Everything we do with the picking hand boils down to three simple actions.

The picking hand:

- Strikes down on an individual string for a single note.
- Strikes down across several strings for a chord brush.
- Plucks down for a single note with the thumb.

The fretting hand has its own list of tasks.

The fretting hand:

- Frets individual notes
- Fingers chords
- Hammers, Pull-off's and Slides

These mechanical tasks must be utilized in rhythm. In the chapter titled **The Rhythm of Frailing Banjo** we discussed the basics of rhythm and time signatures. In frailing banjo rhythm is *everything*. You must be able to use the fretting and picking hands harmoniously, in rhythm and in time with the music. Mistakes are unavoidable. Nobody is perfect. The trick is to stay in rhythm even when you make a mistake. You must practice playing patterns in 4/4 and 3/4 until it feels completely natural.

In addition to rhythm, develop additional practice routines to address any technique that is giving you trouble. If you are having trouble changing chords smoothly then work on that. If drop thumb is giving you a hard time then work on that for a bit. Do not be in too much of a rush to move on to the next volume. This is not a race.

In the next volume we will begin to explore improvisation, transposing songs and other tools that will make it possible to play expressively both as a solo performer and in groups. It is going to be a lot of fun. Until we meet again I will bid you farewell with an old Irish blessing that is dear to my heart.

May the road rise up to meet you.
May the wind be always at your back.
May the sun shine warm upon your face;
the rains fall soft upon your fields
and until we meet again,
may God hold you in the hollow of His hand.

Make wonderful music!

-Patrick Costello

About The Author

Patrick Costello is the author of “The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo” and many other music instruction guides. His pioneering work in web-based instruction has introduced tens of thousands of people around the world to the joy of making music with the banjo, guitar, harmonica and other instruments.

Patrick was born in Philadelphia and moved to Crisfield, Maryland in his early twenties. He lives in Manassas, Virginia with his wife Amy, but still spends a lot of time in Crisfield wandering the banks of the Chesapeake Bay.

Books by Patrick Costello

Available from Pik-Ware Publishing. **http://pik-ware.com**

The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo
Patrick Costello shares the skills of frailing banjo and much more. Starting with a simple picking pattern and a handful of chord forms the book continues to build on these basic skills covering everything from complex fiddle tunes to working up chord melody arrangements and beyond.

A Book of Five Strings
In a revolutionary follow-up to The How and the Tao of Old Time Banjo Patrick Costello tears down the artificial boundaries imposed on old time banjo and presents the craft in a way that gives the reader tools to make music anywhere with anyone.

The How and the Tao of Folk Guitar
Patrick starts out with one finger chords in open G tunings and eases the reader into flatpicking and fingerstyle guitar techniques.

The Outlaws & Scalawags Songbook
Songs about villains, assassins, hobos, bad boys, badder girls and other folks you wouldn’t want to bring home to meet mom arranged for frailing banjo.

This is Not a Banjo
A collection of 27 essays and online workshops written by Pat & Patrick Costello over the last twelve years. Subjects range from banjo & guitar instruction to music theory, thoughts on the learning process and much more.

Songs For Sunday
A collection of hymns, country gospel and spirituals arranged for frailing banjo. Songs include “What Are They Doing In Heaven Today?”, “Shall We Gather At The River?”, “Oh Mary Don’t You Weep”, “For The Beauty Of The Earth”, “Oh How I love Jesus”, “Never grow Old” and many more.

Four Seasons on Brick Kiln Road
Patrick documents through words and photographs the day by day happenings along a one mile stretch of road in Crisfield, Maryland.

The Crisfield Banjo Retreat Songbook
A workbook written for Patrick and Dear Old Dad’s famous banjo retreats in Crisfield, Maryland.

You Can Learn To Play The Five-String Banjo!

Contents

The Mechanics of Frailing Banjo

Author's Note - 3

Getting Yourself Ready - 5
- Beginnings - 5
- Parts of a Banjo - 6
- Your First Banjo - 7
- Tools of the Trade - 7
- Banjo Setup - 8
- Stringing the Banjo - 8
- Head Tension - 9
- The Action - 9
- Placing the Bridge - 9
- Adjustable Tailpieces - 10
- Preparing Yourself - 10

Open G Tuning - 11

The Mechanics of Frailing Banjo - 12
- The Elements of Frailing banjo - 12
- The Strike - 13
- The Strum - 15
- The Thumb - 16
- Old Joe Clark - 17
- A Quick Overview - 18
- Double Thumb - 19
- Drop Thumb - 19
- Developing a Practice Routine - 20

The Rhythm of Frailing Banjo - 21
- A Musical Smith Island Cake - 21
- Reading Banjo Tablature - 21
- Time Signatures - 21
- Rhythm and Tempo - 22
- Note Values - 22
- Rhythm in 4/4 Time - 22
- Double Thumb Rhythm - 23
- Drop-Thumb Rhythm - 24
- Mixing Things Up - 24
- Alternating Bass Strum - 25
- Dynamics - 25
- Accents - 25
- Frailing the Scale - 26
- Rests - 26
- Rhythm Tools in a Song - 27
- Old Joe Clark - 27
- Rhythm in 3/4 Time - 27
- Simple 3/4 Rhythm Patterns - 28
- Double Thumb in 3/4 Time - 28
- Drop-Thumb in 3/4 Time - 28
- Overview - 28

Your First Chord - 29
- Go Tell Aunt Rhody – Rhythm - 30
- Go Tell Aunt Rhody – Melody - 31
- D7 Chord Exercise - 31

The C Chord 32
- Roving Gambler - 33
- Roving Gambler Alternate Chorus - 34
- Handsome Molly - 35
- Quick Change - 35

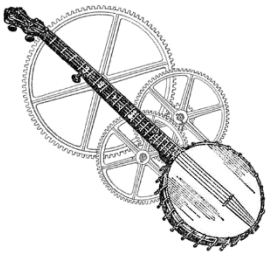
The F Chord - 36
- Boil 'em Cabbage Down - 37
- Lynchburg Town - 38
- Boil 'em Cabbage Down – Up The Neck - 39

Hammers, Pulls and Slides - 40
- A Quick Review - 40
- Hammer-On - 41
- Pull-Off - 41
- Slides - 41
- Mix and Match - 42
- Using Hammers and Pulls in a Song - 42
- Old Joe Clark Pimped Up – Verse - 42
- Old Joe Clark Pimped Up – Chorus - 43
- Cripple Creek – Verse - 43
- Cripple Creek – Chorus - 43

To See the Elephant 44

A Frailing Songbook - 45
- Cumberland Gap - 45
- Ragtime Annie- 46
- Fod! - 47
- Coal Creek March - 48
- Gypsy Girl - 49
- Old Molly Hare - 50
- The White House Blues - 51
- Cumberland Mountain Deer Chase - 52
- Wildwood Flower - 54
- Old Rattler - 55
- Who's Gonna Shoe Your Pretty Little Foot? - 56
- In The Pines - 57
- Jesse James - 58
- Flop Eared Mule - 60
- Wreck of the Old 97 - 61

Moving on to Book Two - 62



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